SUBLIME ORIGINS: THE SPECTACLE AND POWER OF EARLY AMERICAN SUPERHEROES

by

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ABSTRACT

With the introduction of Superman in *Action Comics #1* (published June 1938), Americans became fascinated with superheroes. Following the immediate success of Superman, the comic book industry created hundreds of characters that defied and surpassed all human capabilities. Radio, television, advertising, traditional publishing, and the film industry recognized the monetary potential of superheroes and these characters very quickly began proliferating across American popular culture.

The economic success of this genre might be unprecedented, but American interest in strong, charismatic, extraordinary figures prefigures the birth of the superhero. In both the political and social arenas of the 1930s and 1940s, not only in the U.S. but also globally, citizens were curious about the human potential to control and transcend physical limitations.

As a response to the fascism that threatened to overtake European countries, the United States produced their own strong leaders in mythic, fantastical, serial narratives. Embodying and evoking the sublime, superheroes astounded and terrified. They interact with a sublime aesthetic and paradoxically represent the appeal and irrevocable danger of absolute power. Through close readings of narratives about Superman, Batman, the Lone Ranger, Captain America, and Wonder Woman, I explore the contradictory nature of the sublime superhero, detailing how each character's origin story creates a figure who both celebrates and challenges the moral and political virtues of American society.

For Scott Knopf

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 "By No Stretch of Critical Standards": The State of Superhero Studies[1]

In 1938 a genre exploded into American popular culture. Superhero stories, beginning with Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics #1* (published June 1938), decimated the traditional conception of heroics, introducing a character who does exactly what he wants, when he wants it, with an unprecedented amount of force. Laughing and quipping as he destroys private property and throws mere mortals across comic book pages, Superman demonstrated the use of absolute power in a social environment already fascinated by charismatic strongmen. The whole world watched as powerful leaders such as Hitler, Stalin, Franco, Hirohito and Mussolini stretched political power to its limits, and the more democratic but still enormously powerful Roosevelt and Churchill responded. In popular culture, strongmen dominated American pulp magazines and fitness regimens, claiming that any ninety-seven-pound weakling might follow their example by overcoming the strictures of the body and forcing it into top physical condition.[2] In fact, Americans could overcome any weakness – physical, social or mental – with self-help books such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* readily available. Combining an interest in mythology[3] with an obsession with omnipotence, the superhero's appearance on the comic stands was disruptive and enormously influential,

but perhaps not surprising.

Beginning in the 1920s and through the 1940s, Americans, both children and adults, spent the majority of their leisure time reading fiction magazines (Jones 52). Prototypical superhero characters like Tarzan, Zorro, and Buck Rogers led the way in pulp fiction, radio, comics, and film serials until Superman appeared in 1938 and cemented the genre's cultural prominence. By 1939, a single comic book, *Superman #1*, sold 900,000 copies in three printings (155). The enormous success of superhero comics leads historian Gerard Jones to claim that they were "the greatest single unifying element of American childhood" (170). Though historians do not yet know for sure why children responded so enthusiastically to superhero narratives, they do know that children were flocking to magazine and newspaper stands, eagerly scooping up even the most derivative and blatantly ridiculous stories (144). With characters such as Bulletman and Bulletgirl, Shock Gibson, Blazing Skull, Whizzer, and the Red Bee, publishers desperately tried to copy the success of Superman.

Since the 1930s, Superheroes have infiltrated every area of popular culture. No genre, medium, institution, or academy is safe from their invasion, and in the past 15 years the trend is gaining in popularity. While the 1990s saw the release of a few, extremely successful *Batman* films and some other, more obscure, superhero titles,[4] the genre experienced a massive surge in popularity with the release of Bryan Singer's *X-Men* in 2000. In 2014, Hollywood released eight films that featured adaptations of recognized superhero characters.[5] Four of these were among the top ten highest grossing films of the year. Even two of the year's most critically acclaimed films, Oscar winners *Birdman* and *Big Hero 6*, concerned superheroes and their pervasiveness in American

culture. And 2014 is only part of a larger production trend, with at least thirteen big-budget superhero films scheduled for 2017-2018.[6] The comic book industry has matched pace, publishing both physically and digitally, producing multiple variant covers, flooding online distributors, tablet applications, local independent sellers, libraries, and schools with superhero stories. As an American consumer you cannot avoid the superhero in any medium: films, comics, television, video games, books, toys, advertisements, food products, and clothing all feature these characters.

Though superheroes are such a prominent part of our everyday lives, a popular culture phenomenon that has been steadily growing since the turn of the century, they have prompted surprisingly few scholarly studies. Academies have frequently eschewed superhero texts in their publications and classrooms in favor of more canonical, critically acclaimed material. As a result, most writers approach superhero texts with a popular audience in mind, with titles such as *Superman on the Couch*; *Our Superheroes, Ourselves; Holy Superheroes!; Becoming Batman* and *The Virtues of Captain America*. Other popular studies provide useful chronologies for single characters or companies but do not examine the texts themselves, with recent titles such as *The Secret History of Wonder Woman, Superman: The Unauthorized Biography,* and *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* reaching bestseller lists. Even analytical studies and essay collections (*Do the Gods Wear Capes*, *On the Origin of Superheroes*, *The Ages of Wonder Woman, The Amazing Transforming Superhero!*) do not often engage with the formal particulars of medium when they discuss the superhero's persistence through social and political contexts. The popularity of these secondary texts gives the impression that the field is overloaded and clichéd, exacerbating the dearth of scholarly studies.

Since superhero studies are most often written for a general audience, the work does not garner much respect from other academic disciplines, even including the broader field of comics scholarship.[7] Fighting against academic elitists who saw all comics as "immature and dangerous" and "the classic examples of all that was wrong with contemporary mass culture" (Beaty 21) these scholars have begun to distinguish some comics – including so-called "graphic novels" and "alternative comix" – as unique hybrids of literary and visual art. Comparing them to less popular, "underground" comics, Charles Hatfield claims that early superhero comics were "bluntly commercial" and most often "work[s] of flickering quality and slight ambition" (10). And Hannah Miodrag dismisses them as "low-brow" (4). By rejecting superhero comics, critics such as Bart Beaty, Douglas Wolk, Barbara Postema, and Thierry Groensteen (among others) attempt to purchase academic significance by ignoring the more trendy and formulaic pulp traditions from which alternative comics and graphic novels borrow.[8]

When comics scholars denigrate superhero comics as nonliterary and merely conventional, they ostracize the texts that propelled the medium into popularity and maintained the industry through the last century. Independent comics and graphic novels might employ innovative styles more often than mainstream comics, but superhero comics in the 1930s and 1940s created and codified the conventions these more esoteric texts subvert. In addition to celebrating formal innovation, critics often laud texts that challenge superhero themes.[9] Graphic novels such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* do examine the dubious authority of superpower, but without fully considering the first superhero texts, critics fail to identify this same subversive tendency in even the earliest examples of the genre.

Rather than dismissing early texts, critics can still study the literary and artistic possibilities of avant-garde comics while respecting the medium's origins by using early comics to establish traditional forms rather than rejecting them entirely. While comics scholarship has flourished in the last five years, finally gaining some ground in its fight for prestige, it has separated itself from superhero scholarship, causing the latter to lag behind, entrenched in a publishing world that seeks popular accessibility. Work on early superhero texts is far from complete, and popular writing about superheroes tends to concern the biographical details of characters and creators, neglecting the interaction between form and content.

Many superhero studies provide a broad overview of the genre, identifying cultural and textual trends over time, but few concentrate on specific examples of the genre's formal achievements. Rather than explore the superhero's evolution through time, I focus on the sudden, explosive emergence of the genre in America in the 1930s and 1940s. Throughout this early era of superhero texts, characters such as Superman, Batman, the Lone Ranger, Captain America, and Wonder Woman engage in repetitive and visually explicit violence and insist that this violence is in the service of their communities. As these characters constitute their supernatural abilities through violent performance, they evoke and embody a sublime aesthetic. While folk heroes such as Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan captured the American imagination long before Superman, and pulp heroes such as Tarzan and Buck Rogers explored heroic identities in a more contemporary context, superheroes – as they are first seen in comics – subsumed all traditional heroic categories. Human-like figures that exist beyond the realm of the humanly possible, superheroes transcend generic conventions and produce a sublime

response in their readers. While not universally loved, superhero comics did incur a reaction that was almost always extreme, selling in record-breaking numbers and eventually provoking a congressional hearing about their disturbing violence. The superhero enacts violence that awes, astounds, confuses, horrifies, and inspires both his opponents and his readers. The juxtaposition of emotions inherent in the sublime allows the superhero an ambivalent position in relation to his own violence. Superhero violence is both pleasurable and terrifying, and from the first narratives, superhero texts have critiqued as much as celebrated their protagonists' sublime embodiments. Contending with an aesthetic as nebulous and transient as the sublime, these texts forge ambiguous characters who may repeatedly transform through years of political and cultural particularities.

As superhero characters investigate the possibility of civic and singular righteousness, they reflect a common American rhetorical strategy: using the sublime as an authorizing moral force in social and political maneuvers. General trends in political, cultural, and social values in the first half of the 20th century follow a sublime logic. While fascism infected other countries, Americans, too, were inspired by strong, charismatic men. Beginning, perhaps, at the turn of the century with Theodore Roosevelt and his insistence on rejuvenating, masculine sojourns into the primitive wilderness, Americans were fascinated with the possibilities of restructuring the body through sheer will. Bodybuilder and magazine publisher Bernarr MacFadden began a physical regimen that insisted men and women might overcome their weaknesses by forcing their own bodies to comply with their desires. Following a strict program, any American might overcome his childhood asthma and become a strapping, capable adult, mimicking the

rise of Roosevelt from weakling to the leader of the free world. In this sublime version of the American Dream, the physical dictates of the world could overpower the imagination, but any successful citizen might surpass these problems. At his first inaugural address, in the midst of a devastating Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt claimed, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Faced with dire economic conditions, drought and mass migration in the Midwest, and an imminent global war, American citizens in the 1930s popularized texts that transcended and reconfigured overwhelming material problems.

The creators of superheroes – usually collaborative creative teams rather than single authors – might not have been consciously aware of the aesthetic theory that drives their work, but the superheroes that became popular in the 1930s and remained successful through the following century were those that engaged with a similar sublime aesthetic. Popular culture scholars such as John Fiske, John Cawelti, Stuart Hall, and Roland Barthes argue that writers and readers absorb and adapt dominant ideologies and myths. At the moment when superheroes burst into American popular culture, the sublime informed political and social movements around the world. In America, texts about superhuman characters who omnipotently impose their will were immediately popular not only because of their displays of immense power, but also because each display of sublime violence repeatedly undermined, transcended and reconstituted their moral authority. While fascist leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini gained popularity in Europe, America still insisted on the democratic possibilities of the sublime. Transcendence was available to any ninety-seven-pound weakling, and Americans remained suspicious of any singular display of absolute power. Superheroes violently enact their will according

to the dictates of their own conscious, but their sublime performance undercuts and explodes all heroic categories.

1.2 Negative Pleasure and Sublime Origins

Every superhero has an origin story. Transitioning from ordinary to exceptional, the superhero confronts and incorporates his own superpowers into his conception of heroism. Growing up in a rural, Midwestern farming community, Clark Kent slowly realizes he can perform tasks his peers cannot. Walking down the streets of Manhattan in a star-spangled swimsuit, Wonder Woman confronts the astonished stares of mortal New Yorkers. Waking up from a bullet-induced coma, the Lone Ranger accepts responsibility for the peaceful settling of the West. And crying by the side of his bed one terrible night, a young Bruce Wayne dedicates his life to destroying the criminals of Gotham. The origin story describes the moment of the superhero's constitution, a moment when he realizes he is an Other, different from his peers because of his superiority. In Philip Wylie's *Gladiator* – a pulp novel often credited with galvanizing the superhero texts of the 1930s – Hugo Danner runs through a forest and suddenly realizes his unusual physical capabilities: "'Good Jesus!'" Hugo "exult[s]" as he flies through the air: "In those lonely, incredible moments Hugo found himself. There in the forest beyond the eye of man, he learned that he was superhuman. It was a rapturous discovery" (28). The origin is a sublime moment for the hero; his superpowered body overwhelms his senses and confounds his imagination. He recognizes his own sublime potential, and he incorporates sublimity into his identity.

The sublime origin is both a story that attempts to represent the sublime, and also

a narrative that evades the Kantian *a priori* categories of time and space. As the character proliferates across various mediums with different audiences and different formal particularities, origin stories change. Reprinted, edited, expanded or contracted, new origins add to the old without subsuming original iterations. Each superhero character remains recognizable even as time passes, costumes change, and origin stories contradict, with no single origin taking precedent in an overarching sense of continuity. The popularity of the superhero in American culture derives from his unfixed, sublime origins. As evolving political and social circumstances affect popular taste, superhero characters resist clear definitions and boundaries, evoking a sublime aesthetic to both critique an unqualified use of force while also justifying heroic violence. The sublime renders these characters fragmented and vulnerable. Though readers often associate superheroes with extreme, infallible violence, each character's popularity depends on his ability to fracture across texts, in various mediums, with disparate social and political agendas. It is the superhero's adaptability, not his perfection, which ensures his perennial eminence.

By adapting to new cultural climates, superheroes differ from earlier American folk heroes. Figures such as Paul Bunyan or John Henry represent the national values of endurance and selfless generosity by retaining fixed, symbolic functions. In contrast to folklore, superhero texts employ shifting origins that allow the superhero to transform and evolve, constructing a reactionary, insecure moral function. The superhero resists any complete and consistent ethical system; instead, he acts according to his will, remaining popular when his will complies with the political and social mores of contemporary audiences. In the first half of the 20th century, when the United States was solidifying its

reputation as a global political force, incorporating new social programs and political ideologies, and experimenting with a slew of technological advancements, superheroes emerge as a way to both justify and criticize various power structures and the violent physical actions that uphold power. Though the superhero acts as though his morality is universal and absolute, unstable origins consistently reshape his morality to serve a mythic function. As Barthes claims, myth "empt[ies] reality" by "transforming . . . history into nature" (154-55). So a sublime origin, forever unfixed in history, creates a myth of America that is "fixated and frozen" (169) and yet continually shifts to accommodate a changing culture. This paradox at the heart of American myth is also the central contradiction of the sublime: a feeling of both mental movement and also rational mastery, an aesthetic that continually slips out of the subject's understanding.

In his *Philosophical Enquiry* Edmund Burke claims, "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions" because "a clear idea is . . . another name for a little idea" (57-8). Experiencing something obscure, infinite or boundless, we recognize that the object that evokes a sublime sensation is an object with power: "In short, wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror" (61). When we "know the full extent of any danger" we can comprehend the object and rationally determine how to proceed. But when the object is obscure, its boundaries and form unknown, then we approach the object with fear and apprehension. Though at any point in time the superhero may employ a limited set of powers, his shifting origin story allows for infinite possibilities. Burke defines the sublime as unbounded, claiming that a sublime catalyst – like a superhero – is potentially dangerous.

While Burke explains how the sublime is super, Kant explores the subjective process of the aesthetic and claims that the sublime might also provoke heroism. Shifting his examination to the subject rather than the object in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant explains how aesthetic experience derives from both physical sensations to stimuli and the rational way we interpret those sensations.[10] He agrees with Burke's description of the sublime as terrifying, exciting, and obscure, calling the feeling a "negative pleasure" (98), but he situates the sublime solely in the subject's mental processes. When a subject encounters an object he feels as sublime, his imagination, dependent on the sensible, cannot understand or reproduce the object. Reason must intervene, transcending the physical world of sensations by thinking of the mathematically large or the dynamically strong as rational concepts. Dividing the aesthetic response into a rational encounter with an object that subsumes a physical encounter, Kant places physicality and rationality in a hierarchical relationship that allows the subject to put nature to "use" in order to prove himself "entirely independent of nature" (100).[11]

Kant claims that "if reason had full control over the faculty of desire" every human would act according to moral law (*Groundwork,* 73).[12] Universal moral law lends the human a "certain sublimity and dignity. For it is not in so far as he is *subject* to the law that he has sublimity, but rather in so far as, in regard to this very same law, he is at the same time its *author* and is subordinated to it only on this ground" (119). While Kant argues that every human subject is autonomous – and, therefore, equally capable of experiencing the sublime, acting rationally, and arriving at the same moral conclusions – superhero texts designate the hero as both more physically capable and more rational than the inferior human being. Enacting his will as his origins shift through various mediums

and politics, the superhero constitutes himself beyond rationality. Superceding Kant's moral categories, the superhero becomes Burke's sublime object – a hero that transcends all normalized values. While Kant claims that the moral individual must treat every other human as "an end in himself, *not merely as a means* for arbitrary use by this or that will" (105), the superhero, defying the merely human definitions of heroism, protects by subjugating, ironically forcing this dictum on others. Through his superpowers, he embodies the sublime in a way that no other human can. The superhero, therefore, is not a model of behavior as some popular criticism has suggested, but rather an impossible ideal, an embodied sublime that constantly contradicts itself.

Nietzsche venerates this version of the superman, or what he calls the übermensch, as the terminal state towards which mankind must constantly strive in order to "overcome" the human (*Zarathustra* 65). While Kant believes that man elevates himself above the sensible world through reason, Nietzsche claims that "the enlightened man says: I am body entirely, and nothing beside" (61). Those who "bury the head in the sand of heavenly things" are "ingrates" who do not recognize that they "owe the convulsion and joy of their transport" "to their bodies and to this earth" (60). Inverting the Enlightenment hierarchy, Nietzsche celebrates an aesthetic that acknowledges the sublime realities of life, when our reason "suffers" in the face of "tremendous terror" (*Birth of Tragedy* 36). He believes that sublime feeling, or man's sensible interaction with nature as a pure aesthetic, allows man to "feel himself a god" (37). Shaping his own perceptions of nature, the übermensch may now use his will to create his own value system and ignore the artificial constrictions of science and rationality. He becomes "judge and avenger and victim of his own law," regarding humanity as "a laughing-stock

or a painful embarrassment" (*Zarathustra* 137, 42).

When the übermensch transcends the constraints of rationality, he becomes amoral and, thus, infinitely versatile. While more traditional heroes adhere to a strict, altruistic, prosocial ethics, the übermensch disregards all moral restrictions, freeing himself completely from the merely mortal herd. Forging his own behaviors outside the confines of the rational and moral, the übermensch can adapt in any circumstance and prove his superiority. Superheroes, too, reject the moral values of the herd. Enacting extreme, superpowered violence, superheroes push themselves outside any rational system of ethics, but then, through their adaptable superiority, immediately reconfigure heroic categories to account for their behaviors. Nietzsche claims that "only when the hero has deserted the soul does there approach it in dreams – the superhero" (141). And while superheroes appear to adhere to this definition of the übermensch, the texts that they inhabit self-consciously examine this version of heroism. Placing their heroes in the democratic boundaries of the United States, superhero texts question the amoral function of the übermensch while joyfully celebrating his violence. Relishing the negative pleasure of the sublime, superhero texts embrace the contradiction at the center of the aesthetic.[13]

1.3 Defining a Genre

Superhero scholarship is often concerned with the precise definition of the genre. In *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan argues that superheroes must have powers beyond human capabilities, consistent maxims, secret identities, and "generic distinction" (39). The inconclusiveness of this last stipulation applies to all those

heroes who might not possess one of the previous characteristics, but whom critics and readers still identify as superheroes. In other words, we know a superhero when we see one. This definition of a genre by "generic distinction" is tautological: a text is part of a specific genre because we recognize it as part of that specific genre.[14] And the presence of it in one of the more oft-cited superhero studies helps illustrate why defining superhero texts by their semantic traits, what Rick Altman calls the "building blocks" of a genre, does little to explain why readers tend to group these texts together.[15] As Altman argues, semantic traits might illustrate what a genre looks like, but cannot explain the syntactical relationships inside and between genres (32-4).

Rather than disqualify a character from the genre because of a series of semantic traits, I consider a hero's relationship to the sublime as qualifying evidence of the "super" moniker. Combining two linguistic components, the word "superhero" supplants the heroic genre, describing a character who supersedes the traditional conception of a hero. An object labeled "super" transcends the normative boundaries of its initial designation. The object retains some characteristics, but it has risen, as the OED definition suggests, "above, over, beyond" its own classification. Not merely human, the superhuman is something new, something that exceeds humanity, something that has "greater influence, capacity, etc. than another of its kind" (OED "Super"). Fiction often explores the discomforting effects of liminality when a character blurs the boundaries of normative categories. By compounding "super" with "hero," the term "superhero" immediately reconfigures the definition of a hero, creating a sublime figure who is both exceptional and acceptable. When superheroes enact horrible, gory, and gratuitous violence, readers experience the display as sublime spectacle, an aesthetic beyond human understanding.

So the semantic elements of these texts do not necessarily constitute "generic distinction," to use Coogan's term, but rather a syntactic idea defines the boundaries of the genre: all superhero texts investigate the supposition that (super)might makes right.

Witnessing the superhero as a sublime catalyst and embodiment, the narrative communities in these texts often follow the process of the Kantian sublime. While their initial response is an overwhelming confusion akin to fear, they eventually accept the superhero in their community, imagining that the superhero will always work towards moral, beneficial ends. Witnessing impossible and unauthorized power, the narrative community embraces the pleasurable fear of the sublime and upholds and sanctions the hero's violence.

Critics have worried about the authoritative power of the superhero since the earliest examples of the genre. When John Lawrence and Robert Jewett claim in 2002 that superhero texts encourage a credulous, passive community that upholds the superhero in a "spectator democracy" (29), they echo Frederic Wertham's infamous 1953 denunciation of Superman as a Nazi and Wonder Woman as a fascist: superheroes "mak[e readers] submissive and receptive to the blandishments of strong men who will solve all their social problems for them – by force" (34). Considering the historical context, this reading of early superheroes reflects American fears of impending fascist threats. But even the first superhero texts challenge the hero's moral authority, shrewdly examining the consequences of an embodied sublime. Though Franklin Delano Roosevelt greatly expanded the role of the federal government and served four terms, he was also dedicated to a democratic system of government. And America's interest in the strongman never erupted into full-blown fascism. So although superheroes have much in

common with despots, the texts they populate provided a democratic response to a worldwide trend towards tyranny. Through serialization, form, and narrative ambiguity these texts use the sublime to critique both the superhero's omnipotence and the community's deliberate concession to his power. Rather than representing the narrative community as passive – as Lawrence, Jewett, and Wertham argue – these texts argue that citizens actively divest themselves of power when they choose to assimilate the hero into American democracy. Superhero texts constantly grapple with the ethics of this choice, furnishing sophisticated critiques of American citizenship.

The tension, or lack of tension, between the superhero, his community, and his enemies tests the border between absolute and conditional moral authority, heroism and villainy, and peace and violence. The superhero exists in a liminal space between the human and the gods. He can be omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and omniversal, but he is also terrestrial, and, therefore, subjective and fallible. As mythic figures embedded into political, national narratives, superheroes unsettle traditional American beliefs about immigration, war, innocence, poverty, gender, and ambition. These texts depict how aesthetics produce and determine both violence and heroism, identifying the sublime as an intersection between two otherwise contradictory actions. Superheroes are only unambiguous when their narrative community and their readers believe them to be heroic. When readers and other characters accept the superhero's sublime reconfiguration of heroic categories, he is a hero. If they begin to question the aestheticization of violence, they begin to question the entire spectacle of the texts. Superhero narratives build a critique of the sublime into their serialized stories when they hint that violence might have real, physical consequences, presenting the hero as an authoritative presence

in a world of discretionary, contingent ethics. While the genre delights in the aesthetic possibilities of the superhero, it also exposes the inherent danger in unqualified power.

Reading comics can, itself, be a sublime experience, as characters appear in multiple publications and mediums at once, sometimes referencing different narrative arcs, plots, and origin stories. At any one time a superhero might be an unambiguous hero in one publication, a rogue vigilante in another, and a faithful sidekick to a more powerful superhero in another. Depending on the texture and purpose of his violence in a particular storyline, Batman might be a hero, a villain, or both simultaneously. All of these different narratives exist autonomously – the publication might insist on their autonomy by claiming that the narrative does not exist "in continuity" – but, as any comics fan knows, every superhero narrative helps craft the character as he evolves through time. Online message boards host thousands of fans who debate the realism and continuity of superhero texts, arguing over whether a hero would *really* behave a certain way according to the information in countless stories in a variety of formats. The superhero's interaction with the sublime provides a narrative thread that connects all of these disparate texts, a pattern that develops between individual expressions of violence. In every context, whether it is a cereal box in 2013 or a propagandistic flyer in support of a war in 1942, the superhero can reassess, evolve, or reaffirm the authority he derives from his relationship to the sublime. His mental and physical superiority both justifies and unsettles his violence. Every new assessment of his abilities, maxim, or purpose proves his flexibility and his prolific and enduring position in contemporary culture.

1.4 "To Fight Injustice, To Right That Which Is Wrong, And To Serve All Mankind": The Heroes[16]

Because the number of superheroes renders a comprehensive, detailed study of the genre impossible, I focus on a few of the most popular heroes at the moment of their origin.[17] To explain why these characters persist and proliferate, I examine their earliest texts and their immediate popularity. The origin story initiates the hero into a unique relationship with the sublime at a specific historical moment, allowing him to obliquely or directly offer solutions to convoluted social problems. Though writers and artists frequently reiterate and rewrite origin stories, they must depend upon the first origin to establish continuity not only between issues, but also between the comics and the novels, radio programs, newspaper strips, and merchandising. As superheroes rhizomatically travel through popular culture, each individual narrative recalls a sublime origin that determines the way the character will continue to function as hero, myth, and profitable trademark.

The heroes in this study each interact with the sublime in distinct ways that correlate with the cultural climate of the 1930s and 1940s. In the first chapter I explore the emergence in 1938 of the quintessential, most iconic superhero: Superman. Since *Action Comics* was such a resounding and immediate success, Superman quickly began to appear in multiple comics titles, an extremely successful radio program, pulp novels, and a daily newspaper strip. Assuming a new audience, each of these titles retold the character's origin story, changing the details in subtle but fundamental ways. In Superman's first origin story, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster depict him as an orphaned baby who mysteriously lands on Earth in a tiny spaceship. A nameless citizen finds him

and takes him to an orphanage, where baby Superman is left to fend for himself, autonomously developing his powers and morality. In later issues, the comic introduces us to Ma and Pa Kent who find the spaceship, adopt the baby, give him his alliterative, American name, Clark Kent, and teach him a set of moral principles. As Superman's characteristics and origins develop through multiple formats, his heroism shifts from a sublime embodiment to a sentimental, pastoral ideal.

The trajectory of Superman's heroism depends on his changing origin. In the early issues of the comics, Superman commits himself to New Deal era ideals, punishing those business moguls, corrupt senators, and war-hungry generals who try to manipulate honest American laborers. But as his origin story starts to expound on his childhood in Kansas, Superman's politics become less overt. In the earliest texts he might punish a corrupt contractor who disregards safety regulations, while in later texts he merely saves people from burning buildings. Superman's earliest appearance introduces readers to a mysterious figure from the skies, with no biological or adoptive family, who suddenly grows into a fully formed adult man in the interstitial space between two panels. He is a magical, supernatural figure with confounding and disorienting powers. As the origin adds detail, the comics humanize the character through an Americanized childhood, directing his heroism towards more emotional rather than purely logical conclusions.

This chapter explains how these changing origin stories account for Superman's morality. In his first appearance, his morality is *a priori*, a condition of being Superman, and evidence of his superior rationality. Soon the origins begin to represent Clark Kent's subjective response to his own sublimity, explaining the way he consciously and emotionally makes moral decisions despite the seductive potential of his power. These

origins account for the biological and cultural formation of his morality through genetics and childhood experiences, and render his authority ambiguous and fluid. Superman's relationship to both his adoptive and biological parents dulls the political force of his sublimity by unsettling his moral certainty. Just as the Kantian sublime describes a process of rationalization, Superman's shifting origin story demonstrates how the sublime hero embodies a sublime morality while a more sentimental hero must avoid violent, political confrontations.

In contrast to Superman – who loses his sublime authority but always acts heroically – the comics present the more violent, ambiguous superhero: Batman. In the second chapter I argue that Batman's experience of his own sublimity constructs his dubious sense of morality. Critics often identify Batman as a "darker" superhero because *Batman* texts render the character's violence, identity, and morality opaque and ambiguous. Batman's origin story forges his amorality, depicting a young Bruce Wayne confronting the sublime horror of his parents' murder. Vowing to avenge their deaths, Bruce embodies the Kantian sublime by consciously articulating justifications for his extreme violence. Dividing his persona between animalistic violence and superhuman rational control, Batman manages to execute inflexible retribution while maintaining his heroic identity. Though critics most often identify his animalistic side as chaotic and violent, a primal force that his rational side must control, the early comics depict a rational hero who carefully manipulates his dualistic image to achieve his own vengeful ends. Though he dresses like a bat and hides in the shadows, Batman/Bruce Wayne is entirely sane, and it is his sanity that exonerates his violence for the citizens of Gotham. The comics convolute Batman's heroism by demonstrating the way his rational

justifications mimic those of Gotham's most notorious villains. This chapter demonstrates how a hierarchy that privileges rationality over physicality might vilify heroes rather than humanize monsters, and that Batman rationalizes violence to subjugate and manipulate his community.

While Kant claimed that sublime catalysts were found in the natural world, he did not make arguments about one kind of natural landscape being inherently more sublime than another. He maintained that the sublime was a subjective experience felt universally. But since white settlers disembarked on the shores of the new continent, Americans have claimed that this landscape is uniquely spectacular. Using the logic of the Kantian sublime, American writers justified their exploration, settlement, and expansion through their ability to rationally contain the awe-inspiring landscape. In the third chapter I focus on the Lone Ranger: a superhero, injected into the tropes and settings of the western genre, who explores the American natural sublime. When an outlaw gang shoots the Ranger and leaves him for dead, the Ranger abandons his attachments to the physical world and commits to being a rational idea. He rides through the western landscape, fighting criminals and solving community squabbles with his trusty Native American sidekick, Tonto. By demonstrating the white ranger's control of both the landscape and also those native peoples the text intrinsically associates with the landscape, *The Lone Ranger* retroactively justifies the violence of settlement. The text maintains that each American individual can rationalize his treatment of the other, provided that he understands and willfully manipulates the natural sublime. First airing on the radio in 1933, *The Lone Ranger* informed American mythology in the midst of an economic crisis. The western setting reminded citizens of previous conquests, of the ability of the

individual to overcome and control the sublime, offering listeners a clear, unambiguous and distinctly American hero. Later iterations of the Lone Ranger aired on television beginning in 1949 and continued throughout the 1950s, and reaffirmed the country's exceptionality through the first, tumultuous years of the Cold War.

While characters such as Superman or the Lone Ranger interacted with contemporary politics in mythical or nostalgic settings, other superheroes explicitly dealt with political problems, enforcing their heroic authority by referencing real events and people. Captain America was the answer to what comic book creators Jack Kirby and Joe Simon perceived as the United States' inappropriate sideline position during the first stages of WWII. As a hero who battles evil axis forces, Captain America demonstrates the power of an individual American to make a political difference. But, though he embodies a Kantian sublime authority, Captain America's origin story also explores the destructive power of American government. Captain America interacts with a technological sublime in the form of a mysterious, government-created serum injected into his veins. Transitioning from visions of the landscape as vast and empty (despite evidence to the contrary) to visions of the country as innovative and futuristic, Americans began to use a technological, rather than natural, sublime to justify violence. *Captain America* comics both embrace and critique the possibilities of sublime technology. Forcing the human into contact with the artificial, the government destroys an unconsenting individual and forges a nationalistic superhero. Popular and scholarly critics emphasize the essential American qualities of Captain America, claiming he justifies expansion, imperialism, law and order. However, the character is also, at times, a rebellious iconoclast, openly deriding these traditional ideals. Captain America's

ambiguous relationship to the sublime within his own body and mind allows the character to adapt to political circumstances and reader demographics. His paradoxical origin story produces a character whose political consciousness might completely reverse, but whom readers still identify as the same hero.

These superheroes – Superman, Batman, The Lone Ranger, and Captain America – attempt, to varying degrees of success, to justify their violence through an embodiment of a Kantian sublime. In the fifth and final chapter, I identify Wonder Woman as a hero who evades rational justifications through her evocation of a feminine sublime. As one of the only female superheroes of the era, Wonder Woman's body confuses, terrifies, and awes her enemies. Though Kant and Burke qualify the sublime as a masculine experience, she evokes the sublime through her impossible female body that no one in her narrative world can ever fully explain and, thus, contain. Wonder Woman delights in her objecthood; she gleefully displays her powerful body and reclaims the beautiful as a source of sublime power. She insists that the sensible is intrinsic to the sublime, proving that the subject cannot always explain, conquer, and use nature. While many critics have identified Wonder Woman's femininity as misogynistic – evidence of her creator's patriarchal control – her distinctly female, physical body, both sublime and beautiful, gives her the authority and excuse to perform awe-inspiring, impossible actions.

1.5 Conclusion

While the world experimented with fascist governments, Americans explored the power and ethics of authoritarians in a narrative space, consuming texts that ultimately reaffirmed a democratic system. Superheroes, through the sublime, display a seductive

aesthetic appeal. But the most successful examples of the genre represent paradoxical figures who both celebrate and undermine their own authority. Contrary to what many critics suggest about the antidemocratic nature of these texts, the superhero genre emerged in 1938 as a countermovement to fascism, illustrating what Nietzsche's übermensch might look like in practice as well as in fantastical narratives. Buying these stories in record numbers, American citizens demonstrated their desire to be overwhelmed by a new kind of hero, one that destroyed the confining definitions of traditional heroics. The effects of this sublime spectacle do not affirm the reader's passivity in the face of a fascistic threat, but rather provide an alternative to the simplistic morality tales of both fascism and folk heroism. The sublime, or the human attempt to contemplate the seemingly infinite, constitutes the superhero's position in the narrative and real world. Just as theorists have explored the sublime as both an authorizing and disrupting force, the aesthetic provides a lens through which to interpret a single superhero as progressive and transgressive, moral and amoral, democratic and fascist, queer and normative, villainous and heroic.

1.6 Notes

[1] In his 1953 attack on the comic book industry, *Seduction of the Innocent*, Frederic Wertham wrote, "By no stretch of critical standards can the text in crime comics qualify as literature, or their drawings as art" (89).

[2] Charles Atlas used the moniker "the 97-pound weakling" to market his fitness regimen that he founded in 1929.

[3] Edith Hamilton's 1942 encyclopedic compilation *Mythology Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* was the first collection of this kind since *Bulfinch's Mythology* in 1867.

[4] For example: *Judge Dredd* (1995), *The Phantom* (1996), *Spawn* (1997), and *Blade* (1998).

[5] *Captain America: Winter Soldier, The Amazing Spider-Man 2, X-Men: Days of Future Past, The Lego Movie, Guardians of the Galaxy, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Sin City: A Dame to Kill For,* and *300: Rise of an Empire*. And this list does not include straight-to-video releases such as *Justice League War*, or superhero-inspired blockbusters like *The Hunger Games* or *Edge of Tomorrow,* which were also enormously successful.

[6] *Logan, Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2, Wonder Woman, Spider-Man: Homecoming, Thor: Ragnarok, Power Rangers, Justice League, Deadpool 2, Black Panther, The Flash, Avengers: Infinity War, Ant-Man and the Wasp,* and *Aquaman*, all of which are produced by major Hollywood studios and star well-known actors.

[7] Even superhero studies that address their poor reputation have titles such as *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*.

[8] Wolk's book *Reading Comics* includes the subtitle "How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean," as though the terms "graphic novel" and "comics" are interchangeable. Indeed, for Wolk the "graphic novel" is the form we should read if we wish to approach comics with a critical eye. He believes that since mainstream, serialized superhero comics can be distilled into "particular metaphor[s]," they are conventional and a subtle change in plot can "pass for creativity" (105).

[9] Douglas Wolk, Terrence R. Wandtke, Mila Bongco, and Alex Wainer are all interested in more contemporary superhero graphic novels that directly challenge superhero myths. In fact, DC Comics has published an annotated version of *Watchmen* specifically for use on college campuses.

[10] Unlike the beautiful, which produces a pleasurable sensation in the subject, in the sublime moment "the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure" (98).

[11] Theorists of the sublime since Kant maintain this distinction between physical and

rational epistemologies. Frederick Schiller argues that human will distinguishes us from every other object in nature, and when we feel the sublime, we can "act as pure spirits and lay aside everything corporeal" (73). Hegel claims the sublime leads us towards the divine by showing how finite the physical world is and how infinite the realm of God is (374). And Schopenhauer contends that the sublime erases the existence of physicality completely as the subject "becomes so absorbed and lost in the perception of nature that he exists only as purely knowing subject" (181).

[12] For Kant, that moral imperative is: "I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law*" (74, original emphasis).

[13] Perhaps in part because the aesthetic is subjective, a personal response to incomprehensible nature, it can accommodate a wide spectrum of theoretical understandings. Philosophers writing through the 20th century, such as Bataille, Lyotard, and Žižek, identify a sublime for a more postmodern context – one that affirms the human subject through a rejection of metanarratives. Later feminist thinkers such as Barbara Claire Freeman write about a feminine sublime that celebrates sensible excess rather than the restrictive containment of rationality.

[14] In *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* Richard Reynolds argues that "the first ever superhero comic," which he claims is Superman's appearance in *Action Comics #1*, established the qualities of a superhero text. The rest of his book uses the terms "superhero" and "comic superhero" interchangeably, limiting the genre to a medium which superheroes exceeded almost immediately.

[15] In *On the Origin of Superheroes*, Chris Gavaler also expands Coogan's definition to include a larger number of traits and then argues that these same semantic traits apply to a long series of major political, religious, and literary figures in history. Though his definition extends the boundaries of the genre, he is still mainly concerned with semantic qualities and writes about many prominent heroes rather than exceptional superheroes.

[16] This is the moral maxim of the Super Friends – a team of superheroes featured in the Saturday morning cartoon *Super Friends* (1973-1986). The lineup included Wonder Woman, Batman, Robin, Superman, Aquaman, two teenagers, and the endlessly obnoxious Wonder Dog.

[17] Even encyclopedic lists of superheroes and their characteristics, such as the *Marvel Encyclopedia* and *DC Comics Ultimate Character Guide*, are necessarily incomplete and superficial.

CHAPTER 2

"HITHERTO UNWITNESSED BY MORTAL EYES": SUPERMAN'S SHIFTING ORIGIN, 1938-1942

2.1 Introduction: "A Physical Marvel, a Mental Wonder"

Economic tragedies have always flanked the history of Superman. Appearing for the first time at the end of the Great Depression, Superman initially facilitated prosperity for his publisher, National Allied Publications (later, DC Comics), and his creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. The character marked a turning point in comic book history, inspiring the creation of thousands of superheroes in comics, radio, television, film, pulp fiction, and merchandizing. But, as every comic book fan knows, Superman's popularity soon only exacerbated a sense of bitter defeat for Siegel and Shuster: two middle class young men from Cleveland who developed one of the most iconic fictional characters of the last century but spent most of their lives in relative poverty, eventually working as a typist and a janitor. After years of pitching Superman to various comic book publishers, Siegel and Shuster finally sold the rights to their character in 1938 for $130 and a ten-year contract (Weldon 74).[1] And while Superman defended the oppressed by punishing large corporations and corrupt businessmen, his creators and their descendants have spent their lives in a losing legal battle with the world's third largest media conglomerate, Time

Warner. To many comic fans and scholars, Superman has ironically come to represent the destruction of the industrious little guy in the face of corporate greed.

Superman's origin has been the topic of many studies that describe the circumstances of Superman's publication history.[2] These studies often make causal claims about the way Superman's creation as a marketable trademark led to his popularity and monetary value. But before his brand became the source of so many legal contentions, Superman was also born on the page in a fictional origin story. In the character's first appearance in *Action Comics #1* (published June 1938), the entire origin transpires in a single page. A baby Superman in a rocket ship from space somehow finds his way to Earth where he then grows up in an orphanage and transforms into a superhero. Within five years Superman's origin rapidly evolves into the story readers today recognize, adding information about his biological parents on Krypton, Ma and Pa Kent, and his upbringing on a farm. As various stories rewrote the character for new forms, they modified, revised, amended, and evolved his origin, creating a character whose coherency depends on fractured, serialized, and multivalent readings.

Most comics scholars consider Superman the first and most influential superhero.[3] Though writers such as Chris Gavaler and Peter Coogan trace the trajectory of superheroes from ancient myths, they agree that the character type reaches an apex with Superman. So when writers offer explanations for the rapidly transforming origin story, they most often relay the pragmatic and commercial crystallization of the genre. Les Daniels argues these changes were economically motivated, claiming that subsequent origins "improve[d] on" the first origin's "sketchy scenario" (63). Tom De Haven agrees, postulating that because "Superman had become a valuable property. His image needed

mainstreaming" (73). And Glen Weldon argues that the first origin was only vague because of editing constraints, a mistake that Siegel and Shuster soon rectified (34). While these observations about the genre's practical and systematic growth are helpful for understanding Superman's history, they do not explain the substantial changes to the content of the origin. Superman's origin immediately became the primary model for subsequent superhero texts, and its proliferating and contradicting function across form and time introduces the unique way superheroes can shift to accommodate changing cultures, politics, and economics. The origins not only ensure the character's financial viability, but they also reshape the nature of the character's heroism and his mythic function.[4]

In his famous essay, "The Myth of Superman," Umberto Eco considers the character's mythopoeic stasis through thousands of different narratives. He claims that Superman is both mythic and romantic, and so the character must "precitabl[y]" "embod[y] a law, or universal demand," and simultaneously "serve as a reference point for behavior and feelings which belong to us all" (15). Eco believes that Superman, though infinitely powerful, never exercises the full extent of his power because of his unique position as humanized myth. His heroism remains relatively ineffectual and contained because his powers must never disrupt the fixity of his narrative world, and, therefore, Superman always exists in an "immobile present" (19). Writing in 1972, Eco is primarily interested in a contemporary version of Superman – one that had already fully explored the character's midwestern, pastoral upbringing. The essay ignores the publication history of the character, which included comics, newspaper strips, radio serials, novels, films, and television programs that all offered different versions of the

origin.[5] Multiple iterations, and their rhizomatic, concurrent existence, allow the character to embody contradiction. But Superman began in a single issue, a representation of the character that did not encourage identification until multiple origin stories humanized and constrained him.[6]

As Superman's origin story changes, so does his superpowered body and his heroism. Early stories all uphold the ethics of Superman's motivations or actions, but his heroic violence becomes more restrained and narrowly focused as the texts expand the circumstances of his birth, journey to Earth, and childhood. The first page of *Action Comics #1* presents a mysterious, alien figure without any biological or adoptive parents who suddenly lands on Earth as a baby and then just as suddenly transforms into an adult superhero. He is "startling": "A physical marvel, a mental wonder," a "sensational" and "superb creation!" With the sparse description of his impossible, nonrational, and spontaneous appearance, these early comics immediately position Superman as a sublime object; a physical force without clear motivations or expressed interiority, he evokes an aesthetic response in others. As the panels change size and shape, revealing his superpowers without a clear, linear trajectory, Superman fascinates and confuses. Announcing the character as a hero, the comic must organize Superman's overwhelming power, rationalizing his presence with an unambiguously righteous maxim. By the end of this first page, he is no longer a sublime object. Rather, he begins to embody a sublime logic, demonstrating, through his bodily performance, how a subject might direct sublime force towards heroic ends. Though unelected, Superman applies his authority as judge, jury, and executioner, and the reader accepts his heroism as just because it is logical.

All superhero texts grapple with the implications and dangerous potential of

superpowered characters, and the genre's inherent violence forces the narratives to establish vigilantism as a heroic trait.[7] Superhero texts justify the hero's actions by either representing the hero as purely logical or asserting that the hero's motivations are altruistic and self-sacrificing. The superhero's relationship to his own impossible body highlights the precarious position of the hero, standing on a thin line between hero and villain. When Superman initially acts as an embodiment of sublime logic, he is an authoritative hero. Introducing information about his birth and childhood, the texts transform the character into a subjective, human hero. The new origin stories increasingly develop the character's humanity, and, thus, his fallibility. No longer an embodiment of the sublime, Superman becomes a subject, often acting according to sentimental and personal motivations rather than logical and political absolutes. Preserving the character's heroic status, the comics begin to temper his violence, focusing now on individual villains rather than societal injustices. Over the course of five years, from his first appearance in *Action Comics* to his noninvolvement in WWII, Superman transitions from sublime object to human subject, and his heroism transforms from overtly political social activism to uncontroversial, physical bravery.

2.2 Sublime Origin: "He's Not Human!"

Superman first appeared on the cover of *Action Comics #1*, smashing a car against a rock with a grim, determined expression while three men run from him in terror. Without any narrative context, the image does not align the reader with any one character: though Superman occupies the middle and focal point of the image, his facial features are unclear, conspicuous in relation to the terrified man in the bottom left corner.

A cloud of yellow explodes around the action as Superman's physical prowess stuns those around him. Not yet designating this character as good or evil, the cover immediately intrigued readers, and the new comic anthology quickly sold out of its 200,000 copies (Weldon 25).

Superman's debut in 1938 corresponds to the end of what genre scholars call "the Gernsback era." The first to designate science-themed speculative fiction as "science fiction," Hugo Gernsback pioneered a literary movement that flourished in American pulp magazines in the late 1920s and through the 1930s (Link and Canavan 5). While earlier science fiction, perhaps best represented by the enormously popular H.G. Wells, was most often pessimistic about man's relationship to science and his unending desire for omnipotent power, the pulp fiction of the Gernsback era combined scientific interests with romance and adventure tropes. The result is a conglomeration of stories that often praise the efforts of individual human heroes while also maintaining a suspicious regard for any deviation from conceptions of normality. Supermen, aliens, and combinations of both often populate these stories, but they are almost always evil forces, representing pervasive xenophobic attitudes of the era (Bleiler xv). Aliens invade Earth, seeking refuge from their own depleted planets, disguising themselves in human skins, and dispassionately manipulating human minds. Supermen recognize their own superiority and immediately lose their humanity. Stories by Hal K. Wells, Edwin K. Sloat, John Russell Fearn, T.S. Stribling, Festus Pragnell, Clifton B. Kruse, and Charles Cloukey all explore the inherent dangers of the other – alien life that is "invasive and murderous" (xv). Though the Great Depression and explicit mentions of American politics are "significantly absent," fears about depleting resources, aggressive colonialism and

undesirable immigrants infiltrate Gernsback's editorial edict to "take [readers'] minds off the pain of the outside world" (xiv).

Siegel and Shuster were fans of pulp science fiction. As a teenager, Jerry Siegel submitted multiple stories to Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* magazine, and though none of them were accepted, he eventually published them himself in an early example of a fanzine, which he printed and distributed to his classmates (Jones 37). Dedicated to the tropes and style of the genre, Siegel initially developed his Superman character as a villain who adhered to the popular thematic concerns of this era of science fiction. Calling this first story "The Reign of the Superman," Siegel thought that superpowers would overwhelm and corrupt the character's humanity (Daniels 14). Over the course of six years, Siegel's version of the character changed dramatically: from superhuman villain, to "strictly human" detective, to circus strongman, to alien superhero. The only consistency was Superman's name (17-9). And while I argue that Superman's popularity is due in part to the rapidly changing cultural and political climate of the late 1930s and early 1940s, Siegel claimed the metamorphosis "just happened that way," and Shuster agreed: "We just thought it was a good idea" (19). Regardless of creator and publisher motivations, the version of Superman that Jack Liebowitz published in *Action Comics #1* is an unambiguous, immigrant hero. He may act violently and destructively, but he controls his powers according to the dictates of a moral maxim, stated in the character's origin.

Siegel and Shuster confine Superman's initial origin story to the first page of this issue. The art is simplistic and inconsistent; Superman's features and the outlines of his body alter from frame to frame. While the style is most likely due to Joe Shuster's

amateur artistic abilities, it also appropriately illustrates the vague, cryptic narration. The first panel depicts a rocket departing from the roof of a building. The narration explains: "As a distant planet was destroyed by old age, a scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space-ship, launching it toward Earth!" Without providing a clear sense of time and place, the comic only tentatively suggests the logical causation in the sequence. The planet remains unnamed and the passive syntax stresses its destruction rather than the amorphous assailant, "old age." Like the alien planet, the scientist and son are also anonymous. The panel does not depict the subjects' forms; instead there is a blur of green rocks and gray smoke, and the block of narration partially hides what appears to be sophisticated, alien architecture. Tiny square shapes might be exploding vehicles on the streets below, but the visual style renders the image difficult to decipher.

The narration in the second panel fills most of the thin frame, telling of a "passing motorist" who discovers the baby and takes the child to an orphanage. A car's headlights illuminate the lumpy shape of a rocket, and again, the panel is devoid of human or humanoid forms, indicating the transience of the encounter. The art's rendition of vague objects rather than subjects dehumanizes Superman, associating him with the powerful force of the rocket before assigning him any recognizable features.[8] In *Understanding Comics* Scott McCloud describes the various ways that images and words signify through their interactions, naming the type of panel "where pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text" a "word specific" combination (153). By illustrating only a small portion of the narration, the sketchy, shadowed images in these first two panels flaunt their own omissions, underscoring the obscurity of the text and securing Superman's unknowability.

Missing key narrative details, the panels forestall readers' construction of a cohesive, linear, and logical origin. Until the images represent baby Superman, our imagination populates the mysterious rocket. Once the baby appears in the third panel, we might reinterpret the first images, for, as Barbara Postema argues, "sequential panels in comics are simultaneous, always present: the form requires one to go back and forth between panels" (63). Comics theorists agree that the form's labyrinthine structure promotes active, heterogeneous readings. Thierry Groensteen believes "a page of comics is offered at first to a synthetic global vision" which we then read "moment-to-moment," never disregarding "the totality of the panoptic field that constitutes the page (or the double page), since the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by peripheral vision" (19). In this first Superman origin story, the possibilities of the form combined with the artistic style, predominance of words on the page, and lack of human representation forces the reader to move slowly through the panels, reading sequentially, but reorienting herself with each new piece of information. Every panel offers an overabundance of fantastic particulars, asking readers to rationalize the narrative existence of the character through vague fragments, to fill in not only the gaps between panels, but also the logical gaps inside the panels. As Nick Sousanis argues in *Unflattening*, panels "intersect, engage, interact, combine, and inform one another." Their "interplay and overlap facilitate the emergence of new perspectives," a way of reading that "transcend[s]" boundaries and facilitates links between disparate ideas (37).

Though critics, psychologists, teachers and parents almost universally derided superhero comics as low, popular genre fiction,[9] the reading experience of this first page recalls the subjective processes of a sublime aesthetic. Without the humanizing elements

of later Superman stories, Superman remains alien and alienated, a nebulous, vague and powerful figure. Edmund Burke claims, "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions" because "a clear idea is . . . another name for a little idea" (57-8). Experiencing something obscure, infinite or boundless, the mind experiences terror and confusion, but also "admiration." We recognize that the object that evokes a sublime sensation is an object with power: "In short, wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror" (61).

Believing that Burke's approach was "egoistic," Kant regarded aesthetic judgments as "pluralistic" and described the universal mental process of experiencing the sublime (140). According to Kant, the sublime occurs the moment a subject recognizes the limitations of her imagination and must use reason to understand the natural world. Transcending the realm of the sensible, she simultaneously experiences "respect," "agitation," "displeasure," and "pleasure" when she feels "aesthetically confined within bounds. Yet . . . unbounded in [her] power of reason" (114-7). The imprecise details in the first panels of *Action Comics* comprise an origin story that is indefinite and perplexing. The interplay of visual and textual information hinders our logical interpretation of the superpowerful character. As Charles Hatfield argues, this "radically fragmented and unstable" reading process allows for "various interpretive options and potentialities" that "must be played against each other" (36). Making a sublime aesthetic judgment, "we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us" (Kant 119), and may confine the impossible superhero according to our rational abilities. Reading the spare, one-page origin, readers can use their powers of reason to justify Superman's

subsequent heroic violence.[10]

The comic represents Superman's body only five times in this one-page origin, covering his entire transition from baby alien to adult hero in three distinct panels. The "passing motorist" in the second panel takes baby Superman to an orphanage where the "attendants, unaware the child's physical structure was millions of years advanced of their own, were astounded at his feats of strength." The panel depicts the diapered baby holding an armchair above his head with one hand while the staff gawks, eyeglasses popping off their heads. The narration provides a rudimentary logic based on an evolutionary assumption of human progression, but the scientific explanation for his impossible body is still incomprehensible. Doctors and nurses merely look at the baby; clad in white coats and standing at the corners of the frame, they observe him at a scientific distance, trying to comprehend, rather than nurture or instruct, him. While later iterations represent the sentimental development of a child into an adult through the Kent's loving influence, this first origin retains an objective distance. The infant Superman is an object to observe rather than a subject with which to interact.

The next panel represents Superman's physical powers in three smaller panels juxtaposed without any gaps, or gutters, between the panels. He has now reached maturity, and can "Leap 1/8th of a mile; hurdle a twenty-story building…raise tremendous weights…run faster than an express train…and . . . nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!" Shuster draws Superman's body with wavering, imprecise lines and colors. Each of the images shows a tiny, and slightly different figure performing the amazing acts. Sometimes Superman has white hair, sometimes black, his clothing changes from image to image, and his face is void of any distinct features. Each image

also gives a different point of reference. In the first, Superman jumps over the tops of two buildings, in the second he lifts a metal beam above his head in front of a crowd of construction workers, and in the third he races past a speeding, blurry train. The indistinct figure, the rapidly shifting settings, and the panel's pyramidlike layout disrupt Superman's existence in linear time. Comics often utilize gutters to create continuity between panels, and the absence of space here lends an omnipresent quality to Superman's powers. Although these powers are more finite than they are in later versions of the character, the form itself stresses their impossibility and aesthetic purpose.

This scant description of Superman's early life leads to the maxim that will direct this issue, every Superman comic, and the superhero genre in general. Absent of images, a panel describes Superman's decision to become a hero: "Early, Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind. And so was created…." In the next panel we finally see Superman clad in his characteristic blue body suit, red bottoms, and red cape: "Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!" The juxtaposition between the two panels, one entirely linguistic and one containing the now-iconic image of the superhero, forges the sublime Superman. The linguistic panel names the character "Clark," but, unaccompanied by any images, the Clark identity exists here as an abstracted idea. When the next panel names the character "Superman" alongside a visual representation, it solidifies the primacy of the heroic identity. Superman embodies the Kantian sublime. Starting in a burst of rocket exhaust and energy, Superman, as a sublime object, is beyond the limits of human understanding until the narration rationally explains his purpose. His physical body may remain mysterious and alien, but the

narration contains his impossible body when it assures the reader that he "channels" his "titanic strength." His moral maxim organizes his body into a rational linearity. As Superman's powers follow a logical, and, thus, heroic path, the page layout now consists of a traditional grid, one that *Action Comics* will maintain for many years.

While the linguistic panel begins with Clark making an active decision to direct his own powers – "Clark decided . . ." – the active voice becomes passive by the end of the narration – "And so was created…" Clark might initiate his own constitution, but his position as a hero depends on the reader's acceptance of the maxim as logical. Charles Hatfield argues that comics provide a unique opportunity for readers and writers to collaborate to create meaning: ". . . for the breakdown of comics into discrete visual quanta continually foregrounds the reader's involvement. The very discontinuity of the page urges readers to do the work of inference, to negotiate over and over the passage from submissive reading to active interpreting" (xiv). The reader's rational understanding of Superman might not fully account for his shifting image and impossible powers, but it does constrain the hero's body within a rational concept. The collaboration between the comic and the active reader gives Superman the authority to "benefit mankind." He stands slightly crouched, ready to spring into action, perched as though on top of the city he will soon control.[11] The character's identity as Superman subsumes his identity as an alien from a "distant planet," and since his heroism is dependent on mutual understanding, the reader can trust that he is, infallibly, "champion of the oppressed." Though his heroism demands a political position that privileges one socio-economic group over another, his moral constitution is purely rational, free from the cumbersome weight of physical experience.

The next panel, entitled "A Scientific Explanation of Clark Kent's Amazing Strength," describes how evolution developed Superman's alien race. The people from his home planet are "millions of years advanced of our own" and "upon reaching maturity [they] became gifted with titanic strength!" Echoing the language of eugenics, common throughout the 1930s, the narration speaks of an "advanced" "race." The explanation suggests that evolution might necessarily cultivate many impossible bodies, but it is Superman's rational control over his body that forges his heroic identity. Once the comics introduce a moral maxim and readers accept its logic, Superman's body becomes a curiosity. As a physical object, it belongs to the realm of the sensible which reason transcends through a sublime aesthetic. His body is merely an instrument he may use to execute his moral authority with impunity.

2.3 Superman's New Deal

Historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that Americans in the 1930s were inclined towards an authoritative and decisive leader. In the midst of the Great Depression, citizens began to identify weaknesses in capitalism and expressed interest in alternative systems of government. Political commentators and social historians writing in the 1930s agreed that Roosevelt's government was a "postliberal" state that might have aspects in common with the National Socialist and fascist governments of Germany and Italy (14). As early as 1933, foreign news correspondent Anita O'Hare McCormick identified the public's desire for a president "with the authority of a dictator": "America today literally asks for order" (SM1). And Frank Freidel writes, "Roosevelt's self-confidence was infectious. People were ready to believe, to follow . . . " (15). Though

Roosevelt's experiments with social systems and the economy were similar to German and Italian projects, American citizens largely accepted the new, expanded role of the federal government, hoping for a more egalitarian country with fewer disparities between the rich and poor (44). McCormick argues that the government's increasing authority

> . . . coincides with a relaxation in the atmosphere, a simplification of administrative procedure, a fade-out of forms and precedents, which convinces you that, whatever this is, it is not what people mean elsewhere when they speak of dictatorship. . .
>
> Nobody is much disturbed by the idea of dictatorship. Mr. Roosevelt does not fit into the popular conception of a dictator, and there is a general feeling that he collects powers as he collects opinions – to be ready for emergencies rather than with the intention of using them. (SM2; SM19)

For contemporary critics, Roosevelt and Hitler were both "charismatic leaders that held the masses in their sway," and both leaders appeared to their supporters as "austere" and "trustworthy" because they had "altruistic motives" that were "beyond question" (Schivelbusch 49, 52).

When *Action Comics #1* first appeared on magazine racks in June 1938, Superman's sublime heroics made him a familiar type of leader. Superman serves the public in multiple civic roles – an adopted American citizen, a reporter, a punisher, and a leader – and rationally controls his superpowers, sustaining his ubiquitous jurisdiction. American citizens, including lawmakers and policemen, never question his judgments, and are always pleased with his results, even when his heroics are overtly political. Though supervillains like Lex Luthor, Brainiac, and Mr. Mxyzptlk eventually become recurring enemies, in these first issues Superman resolves systemic political and social problems. Supervillains offer a clear, traceable path of blame. The hero can witness a crime, determine who perpetrated the crime, place blame on that perpetrator, and punish them accordingly.[12] Superman's earlier tendency towards social activism suggests that

criminality might result from a conglomeration of various factors, including social, historical, political, psychological, and economic. Rather than identify clearly guilty, responsible villains, Superman must often resolve intangible problems that slowly develop over time through neglect, greed, or corruption. The comics consistently represent the hero with a blank expression, his mouth a thin horizontal line in the middle of his square jaw. Absent of thought bubbles or any of the form's usual means of representing interiority, Superman untangles convoluted social problems through enactments of purely logical violence. He punishes greedy CEOs who mistreat their employees, threatens corrupt war-mongering senators, helps advertise a struggling family-owned circus, and prevents football coaches from cheating. Each issue begins with an example of wrongful human action, but ends with Superman discovering an underlying cause for every bad behavior. As a superpowerful being he uses violence to order his community, but it is the rational implementation of his power that constitutes his heroism. Justified by his sublime performance, he reforms prisons, juvenile detention centers, welfare, workplaces, and even traffic laws. In other words, he is an active promoter of Roosevelt's New Deal.

In response to an America that was "literally ask[ing] for order," Superman uses violence to serve three purposes: first, to punish criminals; second, to teach lessons; and third, to rationally organize dysfunctional societies. In *Action Comics* #2 (published July 1938) he travels overseas to investigate war profiteers, and intervenes in a "torturer's inquisition." A trio of bound soldiers stand against a tree while another soldier shouts at them, "You'll tell me how many men there are in your detachment or --!" Since corrupt American businessmen are the overarching villains of the issue, the comic does not

identify the national affiliations of the soldiers. They all wear the same uniform, and Superman imposes punishments regardless of the soldiers' motivations. Though the torturer pleads with the superhero, Superman declares that he is giving the "torturing devil" "the fate [he] deserve[s]."[13] In a three-panel sequence, he lifts the torturer above his head, throws him "as tho he were hurling a javelin," and watches as the "torturer vanishes from view behind a grove of distant trees with a pitiful wail." The comic imposes a simple cause and effect logic in this short sequence. A soldier performs an immoral action, so Superman must punish him. Despite any of this war's ambiguities, Superman recognizes a wrong, and uses violence to right it.

The last panel of the sequence depicts the torturer's body from a distance, many yards away from Superman. He is in silhouette, not yet colliding with the ground, emotive lines emanating from his head as he anticipates the force of his fall. But without a representation of the damage that Superman has inflicted on the torturer's body, the comics only imply the hero's violence. Readers must imagine the effects of the fall. Scott McCloud claims the audience is a "willing and conscious collaborator" when they read comics. The gutter between two frames creates a blank narrative space that the reader must fill with her own sense of "closure," thus, participating in Superman's violence: "To kill a man between panels is to condemn him to a thousand deaths" (65-9). By throwing criminals out of the frame, Superman initiates violence, but readers imagine the consequences of that violence and construct their own versions of the inevitable death. The gaps between panels, the missing textual and visual information, force us to participate in Superman's violent heroism by imposing our own logical understanding of his punishments.

As an overtly political superhero, Superman is a "champion to the oppressed," often in direct conflict with the bourgeois oppressors. He uses violent intervention to teach the bourgeois to act ethically rather than selfishly. In *Action Comics #3* (published August 1938) he rescues a group of workers from a collapsed mine. Superman then disguises himself as a miner and breaks into the wealthy owner's party. Lamenting the boredom of this group of "pampered nincompoops," the owner asks Superman to lead the party down into the mines, and acting on impulse and "amid shrill laughter," the guests all enthusiastically follow. Superman uses his superpowers to cause a cave-in and drives the bourgeois to the brink of suffocation and forces them to experience the working conditions in the mines. The mine owner's near-death experience allows him to empathize with his workers as he claims that he, "never knew – really knew – what the men down here have to face!" Superman's violent lesson compels the owner to transform his mine into "the safest in the country, and my workers the best treated." But while the mine owner experiences a newfound empathy with his employees, Superman retains a logical sense of equality. He expresses his approval of the owner's new policy not because of any emotional investment in the plight of the miners, but rather because any sign of further injustice will warrant "another visit from Superman!" In subsequent issues, he violently confronts oil barons, mobsters, car manufacturers, governors, prison wardens, and lawyers, always striving to educate rich, powerful men about the conditions of the proletariat lower classes. By focusing on these political, even Marxist, tales of corruption and exploitation, the comics question the social and legal structure of the country, critiquing the law's tendency to assign responsibility to the perpetrator rather than the larger social system. As a charismatic leader, Superman not only punishes

evildoers, but he also teaches and guides the public towards certain moral conclusions.

In a story called "Superman in the Slums" in *Action Comics* #8 (published January 1939) Superman violently punishes, teaches, and ultimately destroys an entire neighborhood in his efforts towards reform. The issue begins with a juvenile delinquent standing trial for assault and battery. The young man is unrepentant ("If he had handed over his dough wit' out squawkin' I wouldn'ta hit 'im so hard"), but his mother appears in court on his behalf, asking the judge to consider the family's social circumstances. A weathered, androgynous woman clasps her hands together and states:

> Of course he talks tough – what's more he is tough, your honor – but he's only like all the other boys in our neighborhood…hard, resentful, underprivileged. He's my only son, sir be might have been a good boy except for his environment. He still might be - - if you'll be merciful! (Original emphasis)

As the progressive movement gained traction in the 1900s through the 1920s, and New Deal Liberalism adopted many of the movement's ideals, this kind of rhetoric became more popular. Fighting to eliminate conflicts between the rich and the poor, progressives believed poor social conditions formed bad behavior, and they sought to change behavioral patterns of the lower classes by changing economic situations. Low wages, labor-induced health problems, workplace accidents, and limited opportunities forced children of the poor into early adulthood when they were expected to help provide for their families (McGerr 13-18). Progressives believed that this early pressure on children led to unethical, often criminal conduct. And though Roosevelt encouraged personal wealth, he also advanced many progressive ideals through New Deal legislation, creating social programs to address economic need as the source of criminality and immorality (316-318).[14]

Superman's unmitigated reaction to "the slums" in this issue confirms his

allegiance to progressive, New Deal logic. Sitting in the audience, an "engrossed" Clark Kent agrees with the mother's courtroom speech, but knows the judge cannot repair unjust social circumstances. While the judge apologizes to the mother, he also claims that, as a legal authority, he must adjudicate according to personal culpability. It is his job to determine if a crime has been committed and then assign the punishment for that crime – what he calls "pay[ing]" a "debt to society." As a reporter, Kent's role is to rhetorically convey the flaws in the legal system to the public, trusting citizens to voice their concerns through democratic means. But, as a hero with superpowers, Superman can bypass this process by working outside legal restrictions. As an embodiment of the sublime aesthetic, he supernaturally imposes pure logic on a nonrational and defective legal system. Superman is a free agent with unlimited powers, and he believes it is his responsibility to uncover the nucleus of crime. No one in this scene denies that the young man committed a violent crime, and everyone agrees that poor environmental conditions are to blame, but only Superman can resolve the underlying problem.

Investigating potential instigating factors, Clark Kent dons his Superman costume and follows a group of the delinquent's friends to their meeting with a man named "Gimpy."[15] Skinny and hunched, with a prominent overbite in his gapped teeth, Gimpy represents the kind of figure that benefits from governmental neglect. Here in "the slums," Gimpy cajoles underprivileged children into committing crimes, and then collects the money. But his offensive, crude name suggests the way that Gimpy himself is a victim of circumstances, hobbled and immoral because of the economic conditions in his neighborhood. Just as Superman forges his heroism through the sublime, Gimpy's deformed embodiment of social evil manufactures his villainy. But though the attributing

factors in Gimpy's criminality are convoluted and multiple, Superman, as a purely logical hero, must still determine how to enact justice. In the first scene, the judge's ruling shows the legal system's inability to assign appropriate punishment. Rather than examining the criminal behavior as a logical system of cause and effect, the courts can only react to effects and incarcerate indiscriminately. Superman's position outside the law allows him to violently address both the causes and effects of criminality, and employ the punishment that he thinks will resolve problems while also serving justice. While legal penalties might provide a superficial and temporary solution to the problems in the slums, Superman is committed to the idea that justice must be forged in violence. In early superhero comics, violence offers immediate, tangible, and effective solutions, and so Superman throws Gimpy into a lake, forcing the criminal to "leave town." The implication is that in another neighborhood, without these harmful relationships formed in social corruption, Gimpy could not access the same tools that uphold his criminality.

But the elimination of Gimpy is only a partial solution to a systemic problem. Speaking to the kids, Superman states, "It's not entirely your fault that you're delinquent – it's these slums – your poor living conditions – if there was only some way I could remedy it – ." Inspired by a newspaper story about a Florida cyclone, Superman decides to destroy the slums, forcing the government to construct new housing units, and encouraging the neighborhood to establish reputable living conditions. The military actively opposes his annihilation of the neighborhood, shooting at him, charging him with bayonets, and dropping bombs from their airplanes, but they only advance the destruction. The comic refers to this New Deal-esque reconstruction in the passive voice when the narration claims "the wreckage is clear," and "the slums are replaced by

splendid housing conditions." The action is anonymous and immediate ("during the next weeks"), and the community does not express any objections. Though the chief of police must pursue Superman as a legal measure, he secretly confides in Clark Kent that he thinks Superman "did a splendid thing."

Bypassing the law, Superman saves a neighborhood by demolishing it. He has simultaneous disgust for a government that permits its citizens to live in such squalid conditions, and also faith in the government's power to rebuild and rectify. As a 1930s superhero, he is committed to New Deal era politics, which sought to rejuvenate a country deep in the throes of the Great Depression, partially through government funded construction projects. And while these WPA projects were very popular, the acceptance of such widespread government interference was not ubiquitous (Schivelbusch 13-4).[16] Superman takes an overt and controversial political stance when he adheres to the progressive movement's correlation of poverty and crime and solves societal problems by executing New Deal solutions.

By embodying a sublime logic, Superman contains his destructive actions in the slums within the constructs of reason. His superpowerful body is mysterious, limitless, and potentially terrifying and dangerous. But though he uses his superpowers to maintain controversial political objectives, his dependable adherence to his moral maxim renders his actions purely logical. He remains heroic not because his infinitely powerful, unknowable presentation overwhelms us, but because we can logically understand his heroism within a system of morality.

In the first years of its publication, American audiences were responsive to this kind of imposing, univocal hero. Superman comics were vastly popular with a variety of

audiences, but largely appealed to young readers. *Time* magazine called him a "happy combination of Flash Gordon and Popeye the Sailor" and reported in 1940 that *Action Comic*'s net circulation rose from 130,000 to 800,000 in two years ("Superman" 62; "H-O Superman" 44). In 1939 *Superman #1* sold 900,000 copies and in less than a year increased its print to 1,300,000 copies per quarterly issue (Weldon 35). The 1940 Macy's Day Parade featured an eighty-foot-tall Superman balloon, with an estimated one million "wide-eyed children and grinning adults" watching with "murmured astonishment" and "screams and squeals of delight" ("Superman Struts" 18). The DC subsidiary Superman Inc. immediately began production on merchandise, selling rings, sweatshirts, puzzles, paint sets, paper dolls, games, candy, greeting cards, coloring books, and "Krypto-Rayguns" (Daniels 47-50). As people were struggling through the Great Depression, they welcomed a hero that fought for social change in a fictional world while earning major capital for emerging business conglomerates in the actual world.[17]

2.4 "Just Like Your Dad!": Biological Antecedents

Even as American readers delighted in Superman's power, they also began to express reluctance about authoritative dictators and Adolf Hitler's preoccupation with the human ideal. As the U.S. moved toward a war in Europe with the Fascist and National Socialist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, Americans sought to distinguish themselves from these government systems. Though critics during the 1930s had identified similarities between Roosevelt's government and these two European governments, they also stressed the American government's preservation of individual civil liberties as a fundamental difference (Schivelbusch 30). Americans were willing to cede greater

control to the federal government so Roosevelt could enact what he called a "war" on the Great Depression, but they were not willing to sanction the government-led violence the Fascists and National Socialists used to coerce their own citizens (40, 189). As news of Hitler and the Nazis started dominating news sources, Superman comics started redefining Superman's origin, adapting the myth to the specific historical moment by limiting his moral reach and curbing his more violent tendencies. By giving Superman biological determinants in the form of parents, the comic begins to humanize Superman, infusing sentimental motivations into what was once objective, logical heroism.

Due to the immediate popularity of the Superman comics, Siegel and Shuster quickly began work on a newspaper strip. These daily publications divided short stories into black-and-white, four-panel sections, requiring both a new graphic style and narrative structure. The strip introduced a larger, more diverse audience to the Superman mythos. While children bought the first *Superman* comic books, the demographic that encountered a *Superman* comic strip, syndicated by McClure in hundreds of different newspapers by 1941, were much older and more educated (Jones 231). At its peak, the strip reached twenty million readers (Ricca 162). To accommodate the new form and audience, Shuster used a clearer style, incorporating crisp, thick lines, and simplified backgrounds and settings. Likewise, Siegel's writing is succinct and direct, advancing the plot through dialogue and images rather than extended narration.

Beginning January 16, 1939, the newspaper strip expanded the Superman origin story and provided additional details about his biological family and his journey to Earth. The first daily begins with an establishing panel that depicts the planet "Krypton" and its location in its galaxy. The art and narration designates this an alien world, populated by

alien beings: “A distant planet so far advanced in evolution that it bears a civilization of supermen – beings which represent the human race at its ultimate peak of perfect development.” The next panel portrays these “advanced” bodies as “Jor-L” races through the streets of his city. The city’s architecture is indistinguishable from a city on Earth, but the human figure in the panel moves at an inhumanly quick pace as motion lines radiate behind him. In the next panel he leaps to the top of a building, and then greets his family: wife, Lora, and newly born son. [18] Older and further along an evolutionary spectrum than Earth, Krypton is both familiar and other. Though they are physically perfect, these aliens are distinctly human in both form and emotional capacity. The daily comic strip develops the familial relationship by conveying character interiority with facial expressions that are detailed and varied. Displaying love for their son and each other, Jor-L and Lora experience a human emotion that has been conspicuously absent from earlier Superman narratives. This new sentimental strain in the origin story begins to render Superman less mysterious and cryptic. By introducing biological explanations for his impossible body and emotional motivations for his heroism, the comic starts to limit his omnipotent authority, transforming the character into a potentially fallible, human hero.

In the next strip (published January 17, 1939), Jor-L and Lora discuss their new son, Kal-L and his genetic predispositions. From the moment he is born, he is a “roughneck” with a penchant for violence and fighting. “He gave the doctor a discolored eye, and I’ve had difficulty in preventing his leaping from my arms!” Lora declares. Jor-L admires the baby and tells him, “Just like your dad!” When he claims genetic responsibility for Superman’s traits, Jor-L ascribes Superman’s body, identity, personality, and morality with a clear linearity. Over the next eight strips, the comic

depicts Superman's origins through the story of his biological parents. Krypton, advanced to a perfect evolutionary state, is now decaying and dying. Jor-L, alone among the Kryptonites, attempts to save the planet by proposing a "vast space-ship . . . to transport our civilization to another world." But to build his ship he needs the Kryptonian government's cooperation.

Similar to the American government that *Action Comics* depicts, members of the Kryptonian government are illogical, stubborn, and ineffective. Though evolution forges these perfected human bodies, the democratic counsel produces a sense of complacent dependency. Affirming the fears of Americans such as Theodore Roosevelt, who worried about civilization's emasculating effects, the comic portrays cooperation between counsel members on Krypton curbing the potential of individual heroes.[19] "Sorry, Jor-L," they tell him with smirks on their faces, "The council believes your fears unfounded – we'd advise you to forget this silly tale of Krypton's coming doom!" Never succumbing to the arrogance that plagues his race, Jor-L proceeds to build a model spaceship without help or funding. He means to perform a "trial journey," but before he can conduct his experiment, earthquakes suddenly strike the planet. Jor-L and Lora place their baby in the model space ship and launch it towards a planet that Jor-L believes "is the only nearby planet capable of supporting life": Earth. The rocket departs from the top of a building, as it did in the first origin, but new panels add to the scene's pathos. One panel depicts Jor-L and Lora in the middle of the destruction, gripping each other while the world explodes around them. The next is an image of Krypton falling apart in the middle of a black, empty galaxy.

Though only five panels visually depict the baby Superman in this entire

sequence, these moments of pathos between his parents demystify the hero. Rather than a mysterious alien object that erupts from an unnamed, dying planet, Superman is now a recognizably humanoid child with parents who have carefully preserved his life. The extended origin creates a new aesthetic response for the reader, encouraging identification with the doomed alien family and their cherished infant. And while the newspaper strip maintained its own continuity, independent of the comic books, new information about Superman's origin informed both mediums. As John Fiske claims in *Understanding Popular Culture*, reading popular texts depends on intertextual literacy and seriality. Because popular texts are constantly circulating and "marked by repetition," "no one text is sufficient, no text is a completed object" (100-2).[20] Certain elements of the story remain, but Superman narratives begin to fracture and repeat across multiple mediums when the varying origins create a web of intersecting, contradicting, and complementary versions of the same character. When he was a superhero in a single, autonomous text, Superman was infallible, a forceful, sublime embodiment who used his superpowers to achieve his political objectives. The slightly different origin in the newspaper strip dilutes his sublime force. Introducing Jor-L and Lora, the strip begins to represent Superman's subjectivity and biologically determined motivations. And these new character traits influenced Superman's behavior in *Action Comics*.

With the new origin, the comic assigns Superman's heroic proclivities a scientific explanation. In the first origin, his behaviors are unmotivated and spontaneous. Superman acts and the readers, through the gaps in narrative and form, provide the rational justifications for his heroism, recalling a Kantian sublime aesthetic. By giving Superman parents, the newspaper origin begins to form the impetus for Superman's heroism. Even

far away from his parents' influence, he maintains the aggressive playfulness his father identifies as "just like [his] dad!" And though the comic does not explicitly argue that biology determines Superman's heroism, readers can assume that at least a portion of his motivation stems from a biological imperative for leadership and community involvement. Just as Jor-L pleads with the Kryptonian government, Superman appeals to American citizens. While Jor-L is ultimately ineffective, Superman's unique, alien body successfully forces his will on others.

These biological explanations in the origin story demystify Superman's physical powers, but they do not explain his seemingly innate sense of morality. After Jor-L places the baby in a rocket, the next strip shows the baby's journey to earth, and the last strip of the origin is nearly a reproduction of the *Action Comics* origin story. With the exception of a panel that visually represents the anonymous motorist who discovers baby Superman, these panels are otherwise identical to the original story: the baby lifting an arm chair in front of a doctor and nurse, adult Superman racing a speeding train, and then a fully constituted, heroic Superman standing above his city. The narration does not mention Superman's childhood and adolescence or his moral or educational upbringing. He performs feats of strength for the orphanage personnel, but they remain at a distance, populating the edges of the frame while Superman stands at the center. The panel in which Superman formulates his ethical code is still devoid of images, a vague description of a time, "early," in the character's life when he "decided" to act for the "benefit of mankind." This new origin gives the hero a set of biological parents to explain his astounding physical body, but the strip retains Superman's spontaneous heroic creed, as though his motivations are innate and inevitable.

Superman's instant economic success provoked the appearance of countless new superhero comics on magazine stands. Characters such as Wonder Man, Yarko the Magnificent, the Flame, the Blue Beetle, and the Green Mask, among others, quickly capitalized on Superman's success, adopting many of the tropes that would soon compose the superhero genre (Jones 148). With so many characters attempting to amaze and thrill readers, the genre's ability to evoke the sublime – necessarily disinterested and unanticipated – begins to fade. While Siegel and Shuster initially enthralled readers with an image of a costumed, superpowered man destroying a car, they now had to distinguish Superman from his many copies. The publication of the newspaper strip allowed them to quickly refashion their character into a more relatable, human hero. Increasing the possibility of identification, they also decreased his unambiguous authority and began the transformation of the hero from a sublime embodiment to an imperfect individual. In early *Action Comics* Superman enacts violence immediately and according to his univocal and logical will. Upholding controversial political ideals in a tumultuous cultural atmosphere, Superman remained heroic by embodying what the comics presented as an indisputable logic. The expanded newspaper origin modifies Superman's heroism; partially unveiling the mysterious character, the strip begins to establish his actions as biologically dependent and, thus, inhibited.

By introducing his Kryptonian parents and scientifically accounting for their superpowers, the strip establishes the trajectory of Superman's heroism. The strip argues that evolution does not necessarily produce ethical or heroic behavior when it depicts Krypton as an advanced and, thus, dying planet, peopled with lazy, complacent government officials. When we see Superman's biological parents make decisions in the

face of grave danger, we recognize that Superman must also make choices. His morality does not burst forth from his logical and indisputably ethical creed. Rather, he must make political and social decisions each time he executes violent punishments. Superman's heroism was originally sublime and absolute, but the strip renders it qualified and indefinite. Now, rather than displaying outbursts of uncontainable power, his violence is more focused and direct. His heroism continues to work towards his political goals, but by restraining his violence, the strip maintains that his politics are more inevitable and less controversial. He persists in his punishments of corrupt politicians, but their corruption is no longer the result of a flawed political and social system, but rather a personality characteristic, evidence of their autonomy and individual villainy.

After the twelve-part origin story, the newspaper strip tells the story of war profiteering in the fictional country of Boravia. *Action Comics #2* (published July 1938) had also explored the motivations of evil weapons manufacturers – lamenting that rich men value money over human life, Superman stops torture practices, corrupt court rulings, greedy legislation, and, ultimately, the war itself – but in the strip the war profiteers are not part of a corrupt legal or defense system, but are, rather, an organization of gangsters. The war results from one man's greed, not an entire country's systematic flaws. In the end, the U.S. legal system successfully and violently punishes the criminal by sentencing him to the electric chair. This new iteration of Superman maintains his political associations, implicitly making arguments about the nature of war and greed, but ascribes individual responsibility to the criminals, asserting that men ultimately make decisions according to their own wills. In early *Action Comics*, Superman identified evil in a system that rewards criminal behavior by subjugating the poor and oppressed. By

embodying pure logic, he could use his impossible power to address these systemic problems. In these new stories, criminals act independently to subjugate the poor and oppressed, and Superman never laments systematic oppression or bourgeois proclivities. Instead, his fight against evil becomes personal as he violently punishes the individuals responsible for criminality.

2.5 "Love and Guidance": Superman Gets Sentimental

In June 1939, Superman became the first single character to appear in his own, self-titled, quarterly comic book (Weldon 34). *Superman #1* begins with yet another version of the origin story, and just as the newspaper strip expanded the hero's biological progenitors, this new origin introduced readers to Ma and Pa Kent, Superman's adoptive parents. Whereas the first origin never showed the passing motorist who found baby Superman, and the newspaper strip showed an anonymous male face in profile, this origin distinctly represents an elderly couple and names them the Kents. No longer just "passing motorists," the Kents talk to each other to show their concern and sympathy for the baby. Though they still take baby Superman to an orphanage, they immediately return, claiming that they "couldn't get that sweet child out of [their] mind." Rather than growing up in an entirely isolated environment, performing his feats of strength for others at a distance, baby Superman now immediately attracts the attention of a loving, middle-class, heterosexual American couple.

To stress that this is a positive change in the Superman mythos, the comic presents the familiar image of baby Superman hoisting a chair above his head in the orphanage with a slightly different background. The panel now surrounds baby Superman

with other, observant babies, showing that the orphanage is a crowded setting that must accommodate and foster many different children with different characteristics and abilities. A broken piece of wood juts into the bottom right corner of the frame, dangerously close to the superpowerful baby who presumably broke it. In the first origin a doctor and nurse stare with astonishment from the corners of the frame. Now, the doctor is the only adult watching the children, and bold lines stylistically emanate from his furrowed brow. No longer astounded and awed by the baby, the doctor displays a mixture of anger and fear. He stands on the same side of the frame as the other babies, emphasizing his duties to protect and discipline the children in his care. In this new origin, baby Superman is a problem, a bold individual in a social environment that depends on obedience and complaisance. Superman's destructive tendencies prove that the child needs the instruction of a loving family to guide his morality and future heroism.

Afraid of the baby's potential to "wreck the asylum," the orphanage staff expresses relief when the Kents arrive to adopt the child. The baby's superpowers threaten the communal environment of the orphanage, so the Kents volunteer to take this potentially destructive, volatile force into their home. In a panel that depicts Superman as a child, standing between the two Kents, the narration states: "The love and guidance of his kindly foster-parents was to become an important factor in the shaping of the boy's future." Pa Kent says, "Now listen to me, Clark! This great strength of yours – you've got to hide it from people or they'll be scared of you!" And Ma adds, "But when the proper time comes, you must use it to assist humanity." In this single panel, Ma and Pa Kent provide Superman with both of his future identities. Pa understands the potentially

unsettling and terrifying power of a sublime object, and so instructs young Superman how to control and restrict that power. Calling the boy "Clark," he secures the hero with a human identity that subsumes the Kryptonian's alien nature. Ma understands that in order to control himself, Superman must rationally direct his power towards moral ends. Under the tutelage of caring, involved parents, Superman's morality is no longer a spontaneous or instinctive quality but rather a purposeful combination of rules and advice.

In this origin Superman still leaps tall buildings, lifts cars high above his head, and races speeding trains, but these images present the hero at different ages, giving his development a linearity rather than spontaneity. And while the first origin mentions his impenetrable skin in an inset block of text in the corner of a frame, *Superman #1* visually depicts Superman laughing as a doctor attempts to take a blood sample. "Try again, doc!" he says as the doctor breaks his sixth hypodermic needle. The only human figures in the first origin stand around Superman, at a distance, observing his inhuman powers. Now, in this third origin, Superman often interacts with humans, has familial and professional relationships with them, and seems to enjoy his time with this other species. Though his interiority and his subjective experience of his own sublime body remain indefinite, these visual images of his childhood and adolescence portray the organization of his powers. In each frame the character gets a little older and demonstrates a new power, finally performing that power for another person. The linearity suggests a smooth maturation process, as though his physical, mental, and social skills expand at an equal rate. Through the influence of the Kents, Superman develops his powers over time, shaping them as he learns to love and appreciate humanity, just as a human child might develop his own skills.

The comics further expand Clark's humanity and emotional capabilities when he ages to approximately thirty years and his foster parents pass away. Clark stands in front of a pair of headstones, "greatly grieved." "But it strengthened a determination that had been growing in his mind." By depicting the character's interior state of grief, the narration transforms a once innate maxim into a sentimental motivation. His heroic behavior gradually develops through interactions with the people who surround him in his youth, and his ethical creed forges his humanity rather than his superiority. He develops what Adam Smith in 1759 calls sentiment or "pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others" and which prompts us to imagine "what we ourselves should feel in the like situation" (11). What was once a sublime embodiment, an unknowable force that logic could barely contain, now approaches the subjective through the sentimental. Superman consciously contains his own powers within a maxim, inspired by his foster parents and nurtured through his years of maturation. Although the next panel is the same imageless description of his moral reasoning as the last two origins, using the same language ("Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind. And so was created…"), there is now an emotional trajectory to explain the creation of his maxim. His foster parents not only instill him with a moral code, but also instigate Superman's heroic identity through their deaths. The last panel depicts Superman in his familiar pose – mid-leap, arms flexing in his red, blue, and yellow suit. Earlier origins illustrated Superman's dominance, suggesting that the city was subject to his astounding physical powers by imposing his disproportionately large body over an anonymous metropolitan skyline. This later origin removes the skyline from the image, stressing Superman's existence as a separate, autonomous entity. As a

character with a background, family history, and a life outside of his heroism, Superman must use this subjective maxim to form his identity as both a man and a superman. Since his maxim is now the direct result of his upbringing and moral education, it applies to him as an individual and not to society, or nature, as an absolute.

After the new, two-page origin story, *Superman #1* reprints the story from *Action Comics #1* with the addition of four new pages.[21] While Glen Weldon claims that Siegel and Shuster could add the additional pages when the comic expanded to a longer format, rectifying the "bare-bones, just-the-facts storytelling" style of *Action Comics #1* (34, 17), the relatively mundane material they chose to add illustrates the motivation that directly leads to Superman's violence. The story in *Action Comics #1* begins with Superman flying through the night sky, carrying a woman he claims is a murderer. If readers want to accept the character as heroic, as someone who is always and infallibly a "champion of the oppressed" than they must accept his rational authority. In contrast, and directly following the new, longer origin, *Superman #1* depicts a series of events that lead to the first moment of *Action Comics #1*. The story begins with Clark trying to get a job at the *Daily Star*, ensuring that Superman is always the first to hear newsworthy information.[22] He investigates and stops the members of a lynch mob as they attempt to hang a man for murder. Acting violently and emotionally outside the bounds of the law, the lynch mob literalizes the danger of vigilantism. While the earlier iteration of Superman immediately imposes his logical interpretation of order onto the citizens of Earth regardless of legal authority, this later version begins to act as an extension of the law, restoring order according to established legal boundaries. "This prisoner's fate will be decided in a court of justice," he tells the lynch mob, then chases them away from the prison. By expanding

on Superman's emotional investment in human affairs, this new origin compromises Superman's moral absolutism. These additional pages provide a series of events that logically inform Superman's subsequent violence, providing the rationale for his brand of heroism. Believing the prisoner innocent, Superman finds the real killer, a *femme fatale* type he spots at a nightclub. The panels depict Superman investigating, gathering clues and interrogating suspects, establishing clear proof and justifying his decision to ultimately bypass the legal process. Superman is not a vigilante, akin to the lynch mob, but a reporter with the physical power to restore justice.

Meeting Superman for the first time, the accused man asks the hero who he is. Superman responds, "A reporter." By depicting the hero as more of a journalist than a superhero at the beginning of this story, the comic modifies the narrative purpose for the Clark Kent alter ego. Many Superman scholars have speculated about the function of Kent in these early comics. Siegel claimed that his creation facilitated reader identification, claiming ". . . Superman could have a dual identity, and that in one of his identities he would be meek and mild, as I was, and wear glasses, as I did" (qtd. in Weldon 14). And Umberto Eco agrees: "Clark Kent personifies fairly typically the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow men; through an obvious process of self-identification" (15). Richard Reynolds and Les Daniels claim that Clark Kent's recognizable features were "clearly of interest and concern to a teenage audience" (Reynolds 15) and gave the hero "broad appeal" (Daniels 20).[23] According to Gary Engle, Superman consciously constructs his alter ego as "immobile" and "weak" in an effort to assimilate into American culture (82). And Tom De Haven believes Clark is both a caricature of human behavior and an immigrant fantasy (52, 5-6).

At various points in Superman's long and prolific history Clark Kent has served the narrative functions that these scholars describe. However, while many scholars write about Superman shifting across time and mediums, most assume that the purpose for his alter ego is relatively fixed. The significant changes to the narrative in this new origin transform the function of the Clark Kent persona. *Action Comics #1* does not clearly delineate between the Superman and Clark identities when it names the character as both Clark and Superman in the origin. In these earliest stories, the Clark alter ego merely places Superman in a setting where information about crime and politics freely circulates. The newspaper strip maintains Clark's function as a means to a heroic end, focusing on Superman's alien, superpowered body and his biological ancestry. The addition of the Kents and Superman's childhood restructures the Clark persona as a necessary component of Superman's heroic identity rather than a tool that facilitates that heroism. Pa Kent names his son Clark and then instructs the child to hide from the world. In the same panel, Ma Kent believes Clark should use his powers to "assist humanity." The two personas that comprise Superman's character thus collapse in a single panel, both developing under the tutelage of his foster parents. Clark's effectiveness as a reporter depends on his ability to formulate the cause and effect logic of criminality; Superman's effectiveness as a superhero depends on outbursts of physical energy. Giving Superman's morality a subjective slant, *Superman #1* uses Clark Kent's careful gathering and ordering of the facts to uphold Superman's violence. Superman no longer acts spontaneously or erratically because, as Clark Kent, he thoroughly explains and justifies his punishments.

2.6 “More Brawn than Brain”

With the addition of the new quarterly series, Superman was now appearing in three separate publications**.** Unlike today’s comics that establish complicated lines of continuity, *Action Comics*, *Superman*, and the daily newspaper strip all created independent stories, usually contained within single issues or a limited number of strips. But developments in one publication – especially significant changes to the origin story – rhizomatically informed stories across all three. In the same month that *Superman #1* appeared on newsstands, DC published *Action Comics #13*. This issue presents Superman’s first persistent, recurring villain: The Ultra-Humanite. A precursor to Lex Luthor, the Ultra-Humanite is also a bald scientist who controls a “vast ring of evil enterprises” through his “terrible hatred” and “sinister intelligence.” Though the Ultra-Humanite’s body is physically weak and confined to a wheelchair, his rational powers designate him as a formidable opponent; he possesses “the most agile and learned brain on Earth!” And “Unfortunately for mankind, I prefer to use this great intellect for crime. My goal? Domination of the world!” Earlier versions of Superman justified the hero’s violence through his embodiment of the sublime; he demonstrated control of his superpowerful body through an unambiguous rationality. The appearance of the Ultra-Humanite, an evil, calculating, purely rational villain, demonstrates how Superman’s heroism has transformed from logical to emotional. Now with personal investments in the human world, Superman fights an authoritative figure who lacks a linear origin story and, therefore, any sentimentality.

The Ultra-Humanite marks a turning point in Superman’s early history when the character shifts his attention from political and social problems to more individualistic

battles between super forces. Without the mystery and unlimited potential of the sublime to justify his violence, Superman demonstrates restraint of his powers by fighting unambiguous villains. The issue that just precedes this first appearance of the Ultra-Humanite (*Action Comics #12,* published May 1939) is titled "Superman Declares War on Reckless Drivers." The hero addresses the rising number of traffic accidents by punishing the mayor and the police chief, publicly elected civil servants who fail to perform their jobs. Similarly to his destruction of the slums in *Action Comics #8*, he identifies a social ill and then parses a complex network of blame. In *Action Comics #13*, the first issue to appear after *Superman #1*'s new origin story, Superman again investigates a traffic accident. But though the consequences of bad behavior are the same, this issue identifies criminals who are clearly responsible for the accident. Racketeers and mobsters execute the scheme, and it is ultimately a supervillain who orchestrates a hierarchal chain of criminality.

Earlier issues of *Action Comics* depicted Superman punishing and occasionally killing criminals, designating his extreme, political violence as heroic through Superman's univocal authority. *Action Comics #13* again portrays Superman as responsible for the death of a criminal, but represents the violence more explicitly. Superman fights against a racketeer who "knock[s] himself unconscious" when he "rams his jaw against Superman's extended elbow." Superman then takes the racketeer captive and jumps into the sky. Reviving mid-leap, the racketeer attempts to stab Superman, upsets the hero's intended landing, and sends both hero and villain plummeting to the streets below. "Be careful!" Superman cries, but while he is able to save himself, he is unable to rescue the racketeer, whose head smashes into the sidewalk. A panel clearly

depicts this violent collision with motion lines, clouds of smoke, and a white star that surrounds the racketeer's head. Waiting on the sidewalk are two additional criminals who announce the racketeer's death and then quickly escape. The next panel represents Superman on a rooftop, looking down on the scene and arguing, "If he hadn't tried to stab me, he'd be alive now. – But the fate he received was exactly what he deserved!" This language echoes Superman's justification in *Action Comics #2* when he presumably killed a torturer by throwing him out of panel and claims he delivers a "fate" the "torturing devil" "deserve[s]." But in *Action Comics #13*, following the introduction of the Kents and Superman's new, more sentimental heroism, Superman avoids responsibility for the criminal's death. In this extended sequence, the hero attempts to save the criminal, but the criminal's own actions secure his "fate." The comic illustrates the consequences of the violence in more detail, emphasizing the effects as justified because unavoidable, but also permanent and serious.

As new origin stories reveal that Superman's powers derive from his biological parents, and that his foster parents inspire his moral maxim, the comics recognize that his potential heroism becomes limited. His penchant for violence derives from his subjective experiences, so his efforts to solve social problems outside a democratic system begin to resemble the kind of world domination that the Ultra-Humanite desires. In an effort to retain the character's heroic position, the comics introduce a supervillain whose motivations situate him as a foil. His mental powers mark him as another super-human, but his antisocial, egotistical desires distinguish Superman's morality as distinctly prosocial.[24] In contrast to the Ultra-Humanite, Superman appears emotional and human. And the Ultra-Humanite proves to be a formidable opponent because he lacks the

compassion that limits Superman, a trait that was also absent from Superman's initial characterization. With no sense of community responsibility or sentiment, the Ultra-Humanite evades Superman's new, subjective sense of logic. The hero cannot anticipate this villain's actions and must, instead, physically react to his criminality. Rather than the ambiguous political hero who solved complex social problems, Superman is now a defensive hero, reacting and containing rather than anticipating and preventing.

Superman's new, apolitical quality of heroism corresponds with the United States' impending involvement with the war in Europe. As information about Hitler and Mussolini accumulated, the public became wary of charismatic, totalitarian leaders who professed absolute morality. Roosevelt's attempts to push New Deal legislation through the Supreme Court struck many middle-class voters as suspicious and reminded them of dictatorial maneuvers (Freidel 24). As speculation arose about Roosevelt running for an unprecedented third term, his opponents began to worry about his expansion of the federal government. In a 1940 political poster, the Republican Party argued, "Power too long held destroys the mental balance of the holder and causes him to believe that his will alone should be the law."

The earliest iterations of the Superman character presented an individualistic hero with an infallible moral code and a charismatic, proactive, and authoritarian leadership style. When his powerful body, capable of extreme violence and destruction, embodied the sublime, he constituted his heroism through rational, political actions. In other words, Superman omnipotently controlled his fictional world and still remained heroic through the approval and support of the actual world. New iterations of Superman, appearing just six months later, challenged Superman's authoritative drive, introducing more emotional

and sentimental motivations for his heroics. Superman became less dictatorial and started working within the system of established political power, cooperating with political figures rather than challenging and overthrowing them.

Supervillains like the Ultra-Humanite provide a common evil that both the superhero and the government agree Superman must stop. Their supernatural abilities create foils for the hero by showing that superpowers are not inherently moral, but that the superhero, through his own, subjective morality, can control and direct his powers. By *Superman #4* (published March 1940), Lex Luthor replaces the Ultra-Humanite as Superman's primary, recurring enemy. Manipulating the very fabric of the Earth through his scientific gadgets, causing earthquakes and building underwater cities full of dinosaurs, Luthor is a malevolent villain. He enjoys rivalry and consistently plays games with Superman, organizing competitions to test their physical strength and blackmailing the hero to test his mental fortitude. Through the villainous character, the comics force the hero to repeatedly confirm the efficacy of both his physical and mental superiority. Superman scholar Jane Kessler argues that Superman is "more brawn than brain," and that the stories contain "no ambiguity" (140-1), but his confrontations with Luthor establish a hero who must carefully manipulate the power of his body with the power of his mind, a subjective process that necessarily implies ambiguity. As the comics expand and highlight his subjectivity, Superman's role shifts from alien leader to human model, signifying the human capacity to act heroically according to emotional investment.

2.7 Superman's "Utter Amazement"

In 1942, a Superman novel called *The Adventures of Superman* synthesized the pieces of the Superman origin into one, cohesive narrative. Exploring the superhero through this purely linguistic medium, the novel develops Clark Kent's traits and motivations through representations of his subjective experience of concrete settings. After Jor-El sends baby Superman to Earth, Pa Kent finds the spaceship and immediately adopts Superman as a son. Dedicating over a quarter of the novel to Clark's childhood, author George Lowther situates the Kent family in a distinctly rural setting, names "Ma and Pa Kent" Sarah and Eben, and describes young Clark's first experiences with his own powers.[25] Continuing the transformation that began in *Superman #1*, the novel converts Superman's childhood into a American pastoral, set in a landscape Eben Kent tills with a worn plow, populated by farmers, horses, and State Fair blue-ribbon recipients. The novel removes all mention of an orphanage from the story and transfers Superman's allegiance from New Deal politics to an idealized, mythical American community. And while the New Deal did specifically target the American farmer as a representative of an industrious national spirit, Superman's heroism disengages from the controversial and political when it turns personal and emotional. At the end of the novel he fights evil as a perfected example of the American individual and not as a political force for social change. The rural landscape he inhabits helps forge his subjectivity and morality, and, thus, his brand of heroism.

As Superman matures, the novel increases his superpowers over a period of adolescent growth, developing his heroic motivation by gradually introducing conflict into the nearly utopian society in which he resides. When he lengthens the process of

Superman's growth and focuses on childhood experiences, Lowther explores the hero's interiority in more detail than the earlier comics. While the first origin depicts Superman as a sublime embodiment, authoritative and purely logical, subsequent origin stories quickly introduce emotional catalysts into the hero's life. The novel marks a culmination of Superman's subjective growth, divulging the character's interiority to validate his dedication to his human community.

Throughout his maturation, young Clark Kent discovers and reacts to a series of new powers. His first experience occurs at age 13 when he accidentally peeks through his teacher's desk with his x-ray vision. As his teacher searches her desk for a book, he becomes "slowly aware" that "his eyes had pierced the wood" (26-7). Helping his teacher find the book through the use of his x-ray vision, "He was as startled as anyone else at what had happened" (28). That evening, excited about a masquerade costume (the precursor to his red, blue, and yellow Superman costume) he jumps into the air and begins to fly. "The shock of what happened next was almost more than he could bear" and it causes him "utter amazement" (31). As his powers begin to manifest, the novel describes Clark's experience of his body, and his physical abnormalities are just as shocking to him as they are to anyone else. While earlier origins present Superman as entirely unconcerned with his powers, quipping and punning about them with those who gape in amazement, this new origin describes Clark as bewildered and troubled by his newfound abilities. He approaches the threshold of his understanding, experiencing the sensible world as "almost more than he could bear." In *Action Comics #1* Superman embodies a sublime aesthetic to logically contain his overwhelming body, but here Clark experiences his own body as sublime and struggles to prove his rational superiority to his

physical self. These instances of discovery demonstrate the ambiguity and potential danger of superpowers that are subject to the discretion of a limited, human mind.

Clark first experiences the amoral potential of superstrength when he helps Eben win a strongman competition at the fair. After learning that Eben is in desperate need of money, Clark Kent goes to the fair "vaguely troubled" and with "little happiness in [his] heart" because he cannot think of a way to help his father (36). Eben's financial trouble, an oblique reference to the Great Depression that inspired Superman's initial appearance in comic books, becomes internalized in the mind of the teenage Clark, who understands the problem as personal rather than social or political. Watching his father compete for a monetary award in a strongman competition, Clark feels "empty inside" and "his heart s[inks]" when he knows Eben is old and weak compared to other contestants (39). As the audience laughs at Eben's efforts in the competition, Clark feels "rage smoldering within him" (40). The main challenger's "smugness" and "arrogance" "br[ings] a flush to Clark's face and stir[s] his heart to anger" (42). While earlier origins might have depicted Superman acting out of political fairness to the American farmer, young Clark acts out of love, rage, and embarrassment at his father's humiliation. "Blinded by hot, unreasoning anger," Clark punches his competitor in the face, enters the competition and discovers his immense, impossible strength. Through this unfair advantage, Clark wins money and helps save the farm, but his victory is another American farmer's loss. The novel highlights this ambiguity through its description of Clark's emotional motivations. As a son and member of a community, he is personally invested in the results of his heroism. "Unable to find his voice" at the end of the scene, Clark justifies his violence through sentiment rather than logic, "happy that a kind, though rather strange, fortune had given

him the chance to help" (46-9).

Following this incident, Clark contemplates how he might put his amazing body to use:

> …The full realization of his powers dawned on him. Up to now this curious ability of his to fly, to see through things – this wondrous strength discovered only that afternoon – all these had seemed like strange playthings, not to be taken seriously. But now, as he sped through the air, he knew suddenly that he was a man apart, that he was not like ordinary men, that he was a super-being. He understood more than this. He understood that these miraculous powers could be harnessed and put to use. If a man could fly, if his eyes were gifted with X-ray vision, if he possessed the strength of countless men – what could he not do? He turned these things over in his mind as he flew toward home. (50-1)

Reflecting on his "wondrous" powers, Clark experiences his own body as extraordinary, unique and "strange." But he also understands "more than this." He knows that even an impossible, "miraculous" body can be "put to use." Thinking about this responsibility in a passive voice, Clark considers the neutrality of his powers, and he knows that his body presents an endless variety of options – "what could he not do?" By depicting Clark's subjective experience, the passage stresses the unrestrained potential of an infinitely powerful object.

Fortunately for Superman's fictional world, his adoptive mother and father successfully regulate the hero's morality. Immediately following this representation of Clark's thoughts, the novel reveals that Eben is ill and will not last the night. Clark sits by Eben's deathbed as his father instructs him: "Ye must use these powers of yours to help all mankind. There are men in this world who prey on decent folk – thieves, murderers, criminals of every sort . . . . With you on the side of law and order, crime and oppression and injustice must perish in the end!" (56). Dividing crime from "law and order," Eben believes in absolute categories of right and wrong. Therefore, individual "criminals" are

responsible for their unlawful actions, and Clark, with his extraordinary powers, "must" fight "on the side of law and order," which is also and always the side that promotes justice. In *Superman #1*, Ma Kent also tells Clark that he "must" act heroically, but her command to "assist humanity" does not limit his violence with clear borders. Though the earlier origin story stresses the character's subjectivity, the Superman of the comics is still free to fight corruption and social ills while also following the dictates of his constructed maxim. In contrast, Lowther's novel transforms Superman from a hero who operates outside the law – occasionally discovering and rectifying weaknesses in the legal system – to a hero who works as an agent of the law. And when individuals, rather than convoluted social circumstances, are personally responsible for criminality, Superman must only identify and capture the criminals.

Clark listens to his father's instructions quietly as the "western sky bec[omes] a blazing flood of color" and then fades "into a somber gray" (55). He "sa[ys] nothing," because there is "no need for words now," and when his father dies, he walks into the "cool, night air," sits down "on the brow of a lonely hill" and "decide[s] definitely what he must do, what course his life must take" (56-8). Clark's emotional state is physically manifest in the "western" setting, indicating the way the landscape has formed his ethics. Contemplating the trajectory of his subsequent heroism, he is his own city on a hill, representing the righteous possibilities of American leadership, both legal and just. Clark consciously refigures and redirects his earlier "unreasoning anger" as a heroic authority to punish criminals, proving that his moral will is strong even if it is not absolute.

The novel represents Superman's origin story as more subjective and emotional than the comics, using linguistic details to depict Clark's interiority where comics use

visual cues. Incorporating these scenes from his childhood, the novel constructs a hero who is fallible and prone to the occasional mistake. His body is still superpowered, but his rational control of that body is prone to his maturing and shifting subjective experience. As a character whose powers continue to grow, this novelistic Superman is constantly changing, renegotiating the ethical limits of his power and his emotional investment in his community. Confronting a criminal at the end of the novel, Superman "realized in himself a new power – the power of restraint. One blow of his mighty fist, its force unchecked, would easily have killed the man. Superman consciously curbed the strength that surged through his arm as he had struck the blow" (175). By situating Superman in a human community, with imperfect adoptive parents and ambiguous heroic prospects, the novel explores the character's ability to develop and adapt to his imperfections. His emotional response to a series of new powers proves that both his physical body and his mental capacities are pliable. When they can read about the occasionally tentative rational process that controls Superman's imperfect morality, readers might reject the authoritarian heroics of an alien being. So subsequent versions of the hero emphasize his humanity through an emotional and fallible heroism.

Earlier iterations of the character utilized science fiction tropes to astound readers with Superman's sublime embodiment. Accentuating Clark's moral and human development, the novel follows detective story conventions and focuses on Clark Kent in his role as reporter. Clark investigates a series of sunken military ships, trying to root out an evil spy. While earlier comics explored systematic flaws in American social structures, this story places all blame on a foreign agent, illustrating the destructive power of a willful individual. The U.S. government is entirely innocent of any wrongdoing, and all

criminal action takes place outside of the comfortable limits of governmental control. Feeling "a little too patriotic," a government agent "takes the law into his own hands" and shoots at Superman, demonstrating the destructive and corrupt effects of vigilantism. Superman executes law and order as a self-appointed extension of government authority and, aware of his precarious position between patriotism and vigilantism, does not act illegally. He investigates crime as a journalist and uses his superpowers only when others attack him first. As the narration describes through Clark's free indirect discourse, "Needed here as never before were the strength, the skill, all the miraculous powers of Superman!" (198-9). Once Clark decides he must act as a superhero rather than a reporter, he performs his heroic tasks automatically: "He had long before decided on what he would do. There was no need now for thought, only for action" (203). So while earlier origins illustrate a hero who embodies a logical response to evil in both his personas, this version divides Clark and Superman into two separate but necessary aspects of superheroism.

2.8 Conclusion

Superman transitioned from sublime and purely logical to human and emotional over a series of different publications in a variety of different mediums.[26] First aiming to astonish and surprise readers, Superman's specific brand of heroism very quickly became familiar and mainstream, two conditions that cannot catalyze a sublime aesthetic. Superman scholars such as Glen Weldon, Les Daniels and Tom DeHaven explain Superman's shifting heroism as a condition of economic necessity, claiming that Superman's position as a profitable trademark inspired his creators to refashion the

character in compliance with consumer desire. As his potential to evoke the sublime faded, creators introduced the new elements of his origin story to explore the character's motivations and desires, using representations of subjectivity to inhibit the superhero's violent heroism. The comics began to humanize the character, and his behaviors became more predictable and normalized. As a result, the pleasures of reading about a superpowerful character fracture across the countless different variations.

The four origin stories I discuss in this chapter each depict a new aspect of Superman's birth, journey to Earth, and childhood, contributing to the overall development of the superhero. But the pieces of the origin do not expand the story in a progressive, linear manner. Instead, each origin introduces a slightly different iteration of the Superman character, explaining elements of his heroism that sometimes seep into other contemporary publications and sometimes do not. Although the origins in each publication remain distinct, they do not compete against each other in the public imagination. Rather, elements of the Superman mythos slowly crept into readers' understanding of the character and their acceptance of his particular brand of heroism. His shifting origin stories gave the character a mythic function, or, as Richard Slotkin defines myth, a perpetual ability to "explai[n] problems that arise in the course of historical experience" (6). Spread across numerous iterations, different mediums, and time periods, Superman helps organize a convoluted, chaotic world.

By encompassing different versions of the self into an implied, if not explicit, continuity, superheroes compose myths that compress disordered, complicated historical, political, and social realities into a "cause-and-effect . . . theory of history." Even when Superman's potential for sublime embodiment fades with his familiarization, the process

of reading Superman is still sublime, provoking readers to structure their own logical explanations for his aberrant, often contradictory behaviors across texts. The superhero myth, so prevalent in American culture, serves to naturalize and "dramatiz[e]" the country's contemporary "moral consciousness" (Slotkin 5-7). In *Mythologies* Roland Barthes stresses that a myth is "not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function" (129). Like Superman's multiple origins, with both their conspicuous gaps and narrative explanations, a myth is effective because it is ambiguous; its nebulousness allows for its adaptability. "There is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely" (129-131). And though historical circumstances inform the myth, it appears to a culture as devoid of historical meaning, emptied of physical reality and convoluted social, historical, and political circumstances. The myth "makes itself look neutral and innocent" (135). When the public enthusiastically supported the kind of leader who could rectify society's ills with one gigantic leap or magnificent punch, Superman's origins remained obscure and mysterious. When society started to distrust these kinds of charismatic, authoritative leaders, Superman's origins became clearer and steeped in American values and traditions. Subsequent retellings of Superman's origins could pick and choose elements of the story without completely discounting or overwriting the other iterations in the comics or newspaper strip.

In "What Makes Superman So Darned American?" Gary Engle compares the circumstances of Superman's childhood to the myth of the American West and claims that Superman's status as an orphan immigrant made him a potent symbol of mobility,

assimilation, and reinvention. According to Engle, Superman's heroism depends not only on his ability to adapt and blend, but also on the exceptional powers that secure his individuality. He has two identities: "One is real, one an illusion, and both are necessary for the myth of balance in the assimilation process to be complete" (85). Engle argues that Superman's adaptability symbolizes the experience of the American immigrant, but this character trait is also a function of the text itself, which can assimilate American audacity into an increasingly global economy.

As the Superman character transitions from sublime object to human subject, his heroic authority shifts from absolute to discretionary. By expanding his origin story, the comics facilitate identification with the character, turning his logically justified violence emotional and personally motivated. And while this representation of Clark's interiority humanizes the superhero, it also makes him less effective. After the publication of Lowther's novel, Superman's adventures become increasingly apolitical and supernatural, focusing on recurrent supervillains rather than intricate social and political problems. His transition kept him popular with an American public that was now wary of the totalitarian leaders who orchestrated WWII. Unlike some other superheroes, Superman did not go to war. Even when the covers of his comics represented cathartic images of the hero punching Adolf Hitler, the issues maintained politically neutral storylines, stressing Superman's symbolic purpose rather than his political potency.

A supremely powerful hero who begins to limit his interventions to domestic, individual problems, Superman resolves what Reinhold Niebuhr calls an irony of American history. He represents both a "strong America" and also an America that is "completely master of its own destiny" (74) by embodying both an absolute and flexible

American consciousness. As a sublime reading process finds new ways to rationalize his contradictory iterations through history, fragmented texts ensure that Superman will always be a hero. Though critics often claim that his sense of morality is unadulterated – as though he is a "boy scout" or "scoutmaster" who lives in a world of absolute truth[27] – it is his divergent and paradoxical character traits that secure his enduring heroism. Superman is always honorable and guileless, but his multiple and shifting origin stories allow his sense of honor to take distinct forms according to his political, social, and emotional purposes. Describing a transformation of the character from sublime embodiment to human role model, years of Superman narratives never completely abandon any of his origin stories, but rather pick and choose aspects of the stories that adhere to specific narrative strains. DC has famously fractured and collapsed what they it calls the "Multiverse" many times over the company's history, marketing different versions of the characters both inside and outside of official canon. But somehow, Superman always remains recognizable, not only because of his distinctive costume, but also because of the way sublime reading practices can contain superheroes within a coherent ethical system. The pleasure of reading Superman is the pleasure of understanding him according economic, narrative, political, and sentimental threads of continuity. These early origin stories represent the narrative possibilities for this character: a superhero who is always heroic and always contradictory.

2.9 Notes

[1] The Siegel and Shuster families have been in legal battles with DC comics since 1947 when they first filed a lawsuit against DC for $5 million and ownership of the Superman character. They lost this legal battle, but settled out of court for $100,000 for the creation of Superboy (Weldon 74). In 1975, with the support of Superman fans and many artists and writers in the industry, Siegel and Shuster finally received credit for their creation (Jones 242). DC now publishes all *Superman* comics with a byline dedicated to the original artist and writer, but the families continue to fight for ownership. The last lawsuit was in 2012 when a judge ruled in DC's favor, claiming that the Schuster family has no more legal right to the Superman franchise.

[2] For more on the convoluted personal accounts that make up Superman's creation story, see Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow* (109-125).

[3] Peter Coogan writes, "Superman differed significantly in degree from heroes who preceded him; thus, Superman marked a break with the heroes of the past and he, and not those earlier heroes, launched the superhero genre" (189). Glen Weldon claims, "He is the first, the purest, the ideal" (4).

[4] Ian Gordon argues that "Superman's social activism dissipated as his owners and creators grew aware of his potential as a commodity," as though publishers changed the origin to account for the change in heroism (Gordon 134). However, I believe that though Superman's evolution is certainly economically motivated, the change in heroism directly and necessarily results from the shift in origins.

[5] His focus on the contemporary iterations of the character seems to promote the same kind of reading he identifies in Superman's fans: an "oneiric" and "extremely hazy" practice that leads to monotonous repetition (17).

[6] Eco's focus on a 1972 version of the character leads him to the conclusion that ". . . the only visible form that evil assumes is an attempt on private property" and ". . . good is represented only as charity" (22). However, as comics historians often note, Superman's early, political heroism was much more ambiguous and extensive. Throughout the character's seventy-eight-year history, different iterations might evoke any version of Superman that fits the rhetorical purpose of any one text.

[7] In *Superman: The Complete History* Les Daniels reveals that Shuster and Siegel first created Superman as a villain. Daniels argues that despite the creators' discomfort with Superman's "uncanny powers" they transformed their character into a hero for commercial reasons, or what Siegel called a "sensible" decision (14-7).

[8] In his *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, Glen Weldon calls this origin "bare-boned, just-the-facts storytelling, with no room for proper nouns" (17).

[9] Comics scholars Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester edit a collection of both negative and positive responses to comics in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*,

in which writers such as Sidney Fairfield, Annie Russell Marble, Ralph Bergengren, Clement Greenberg, and Delmore Schwartz express skepticism about comics' artistic and literary merit. Stanley Kunitz and Slater Brown worried about Superman's fascist agenda in articles for *Library Journal* and *The New Republic* (predating Fredric Wertham's famous comic book polemic, *Seduction of the Innocent*) (Lepore 184). Sterling North used his platform at the *Chicago Daily News* to call comics "a national disgrace" that Americans must unilaterally reject (Hajdu 40).

[10] Scott McCloud calls this process "closure." Alluding to the destruction of Krypton, he writes, "From the tossing of a baseball to the death of a planet, the reader's deliberate, voluntary closure is comics' primary means of simulating time and motion" (69). He claims readers use "deductive reasoning" to create a logical relationship between one panel and another and construct a cohesive, narrative whole (71-3).

[11] Glen Weldon expresses his dissatisfaction with Superman's first appearance: "The pose is meant to lend him the air of a man about to spring into action, but the effect is that of a marionette or a particularly beefy scarecrow" (19).

[12] John Cawelti identifies this rational organization of society as one of the pleasures of formulaic texts when he argues that "formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values" (35). A formulaic text moves from tension, created in the superhero text by criminal violence, to harmonization, when the superhero successfully identifies and eliminates the criminal. Thomas Schatz claims that the persistence of certain formulas or genres shows that these tensions in society are actually irreconcilable, leading to enduring character types like superheroes (31).

[13] Though we often think of Batman as a more ambiguous hero than Superman, the early Batman comics often echo this language. In *Batman* #1 (Spring 1940) he hangs a villain from his Batplane and states: "Much as I hate to take human life. I'm afraid *this* time it's necessary!"

[14] For more on progressivism and its influence on New Deal Liberalism, see Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* in which he claims that New Deal policies "intent on regulating big business and helping the weak, seemed to be working from the old progressive blueprints" (316).

[15] Though more contemporary iterations often associate Superman with phone booths, he did not use a booth to change costumes until an episode of the Fleischer *Superman* cartoon in 1941, "The Mechanical Monsters." Though the comics and radio serial very rarely used this trope, and the 1950s television program *Adventures of Superman* never depicted Superman changing in such a cramped space, the phone booth became synonymous with Superman and superheroes in general. In *Action Comics #8* he changes in "the privacy of Clark's apartment," a more practical and far less memorable locale.

[16] For more on popular opposition to Roosevelt and the New Deal, see Studs Terkel's

Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression.

[17] Critics of the New Deal have been especially wary of this contradiction in contemporary political commentary. Ellis W. Hawley describes the contradiction: "Americans wanted a stable, efficient industrial system, one that turned out a large quantity of material goods, insured full employment, and provided a relatively high degree of economic security. Yet at the same time they wanted a system as free as possible from centralized direction, one in which economic power was dispersed and economic opportunity was really open, one that preserved the dignity of the individual and adjusted itself automatically to market forces" (98). He claims that Roosevelt mirrored the "mixed emotions" of the "popular mind," which made his presidency appear successful even when he failed to accomplish his stated goals (101). Ronald Radosh writes: "The populace responded to FDR's radical rhetoric only because it mirrored their own deeply held illusions. They could not comprehend how the reforms that changed their lives only worked to bolster the existing political economy, and they did not realize that many sponsors of the reforms came from the corporation community themselves" (56).

[18] George Lowther's 1942 novel, *The Adventures of Superman*, changed the spelling of Superman's father's name to "Jor-El." His mother's name changed from "Lora" to "Lara." Superman's Kryptonian name also changes from "Kal-L" to "Kal-El." In the Silver Age of *Superman* comics, DC used these differences in spelling to represent different versions of the characters that existed in alternative universes. In the late 1930s and early 1940s the spelling changes appear to carry no significant narrative weight.

[19] In *Gunfighter Nation* Richard Slotkin argues that Theodore Roosevelt's beliefs in Social Darwinism and Lamarckian evolution led him to symbolize the American West as a landscape that represents America's possibility of "regeneration through regression, isolation, and savage war" (44).

[20] Fiske calls these kind of repeating narratives "leaky": "Because of their incompleteness, all popular texts have leaky boundaries; they flow into each other, they flow into everyday life. Distinctions among texts are as invalid as the distinctions between text and life. Popular culture can be studied only intertextually, for it exists only in this intertextual circulation" (101).

[21] Glen Weldon claims that the additional pages are the result of Shuster and Siegel now having more freedom to extend the narrative past *Action Comic's* thirteen-page format (34). He describes the first version as "bare-bones, just-the-facts storytelling, with no room for proper nouns" (17).

[22] Allegedly, the Toronto *Daily Star*, the paper Joe Shuster delivered as a boy, inspired the name and design of Clark Kent's initial place of employment (Daniels 27). The first episode of the radio program *The Adventures of Superman* (airing February 12, 1940) changed the name of the paper to the *Daily Planet*. The extremely popular radio serial was also responsible for the introduction of Kent's boss, Perry White, his younger co-

worker, Jimmy Olsen, and his greatest weakness, Kryptonite (54-7). Early episodes of the radio program were the first to describe Superman as "flying," though the comics did not depict him flying until 1943 (Weldon 42), and the first to use the introduction: "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!" (Daniels 54).

[23] Statistics concerning audience numbers and demographics for early comics are notoriously limited, but for more information about comic book readers see Matthew Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*.

[24] Peter Coogan observes that supervillains often have the same powers as superheroes but are not bound by any kind of heroic code. This lack of constraint makes supervillains formidable obstacles. The Ultra-Humanite reflects, and here even surpasses, the sublimity of Superman, allowing the villain to take pride in the quality of hero he battles (104).

[25] The names Eben and Sarah Kent persist in the *Adventures of Superman* television series but then abruptly change to John and Mary Kent in yet another retelling of the origin in *Superman* #53 (July 1948). Still later versions of the story in 1950s change the names to Jonathan and Martha Kent, and the Kents have retained these names until now.

[26] Not fully examined in this essay are iterations of Superman that appeared in two versions of *New York World's Fair Comics* (published 1939 and 1940), *World's Finest Comics* (first published Spring 1941), the extremely popular radio program, *The Adventures of Superman* (first episode aired February 12, 1940), the Fleischer and Famous *Superman* cartoons (first episode released September 26, 1941), and many other appearances of the cartoon as merchandise or an advertising tool.

[27] For examples of this specific criticism see Lev Grossman's "The Problem with Superman," Dennis O'Neil's "The Man of Steel and Me," or C.K. Robertson's "The True *Ubermensch*: Batman as Humanistic Myth."

CHAPTER 3

SUBLIMITY IN THE SHADOWS: BATMAN'S DARK RATIONALITY

3.1 The Hyphenated Hero

In the spring of 1940, Batman left the pages of the *Detective Comics* anthology to star in his own comic series. In *Batman #1* the story "The Giants of Dr. Hugo Strange" featured the second appearance of the supervillain Dr. Hugo Strange, a brilliant scientist and bank robber. In this issue, Dr. Strange frees five "insane patients from the city insane asylum" and invents a serum to turn the five men into giant, mindless mutants, or "monsters," "nuts," "beasts," and "enraged colossus[es]." The monsters are abnormally large and hairy, and their heads, unlike Dr. Strange's bald, protruding skull, are flat and shadowed. The giant, muscular figures lumber through the city, indiscriminately demolishing anything that blocks their movements and distracting Gotham with frivolous destruction while the supervillain plans a bank robbery. When the police force and Batman mount their defense, the monsters fight back automatically, feeling only rudimentary emotions like "rage" and "madness." Since they are impulsive "beasts," these modified mental patients act recklessly, unaware of the potential consequences. As "insane" men, incapable of rational thought, they cannot resist the manipulations of Dr. Strange's brilliant mind.

Naming the monsters "maddened" and "maniacs," Batman flies above them in his bat-shaped airplane. "Much as I hate to take human life. I'm afraid *this* time it's necessary!" he exclaims, sitting behind a mounted machine gun, his eyes white slits in the shadow of his mask. He ropes a noose around the neck of the monster, lifting him off the ground to form a silhouette against a full moon. The monster struggles against the noose and finally dies. Throughout the sequence, Batman remains hidden in the shadows of his plane. His body is invisible while the bestial Batplane enacts violence. The images divorce the human form of Batman from the violence on the page and fasten the rope to the figure of the bat. Like the brainless "monster" that Batman hangs, the animalistic Batplane has no obligations or justifications of its own and therefore escapes any moral responsibility. Batman claims that this violence is "necessary," and then the Batplane perpetrates the violence in the image. The next we see of Batman, he is cutting the monster down from the noose – as though *Bat*man executes violence, and Bat*man* ends violence.

By separating Batman's mind from the physical effects of his violence, his creators, Bob Kane and Bill Finger,[1] divide him into a hyphenated hero.[2] Part "bat," part "man," Batman justifies his primal, animalistic violence through rationality. Unlike other superhero characters such as Superman or Wonder Woman, Batman's physical body is not superpowered. With the help of a few gadgets he performs incredible acts of strength and resilience, but his heroism almost always exists within the confines of scientific possibility. Still, scholars consistently identify the character as a "superhero."[3] Since his mortal human body does not automatically prove his superiority, Batman must use rational powers to establish his heroic authority. His efficacy as a hero depends on his

transcendence of his physical body, and he exists in these panels without form, indistinct amongst the shadows. He suddenly disappears and appears, giving criminals and readers the impression that he is infinite. Without a clear form, Batman could be anywhere and everywhere at once. He disseminates his presence into the criminal underground of Gotham, and bodiless, the idea of Batman continues to fight crime even when Batman does not appear in the frame. His ability to transcend materiality and to control his city through rationality makes him an embodiment of a sublime aesthetic.

Kant describes the sublime as the moment when rationality reaches the limits of sensibility, and we recognize our ability to think independently of physical experience. Confronting a dynamically strong or mathematically large object, the imagination tries to "apprehend[d]" and then "comprehen[d]" the object through the senses, but soon recognizes its own limitations (108). Reason intervenes, proving that the human mind can understand the infinite and can make objective moral choices in the face of the insurmountably strong. The sublime divides rationality from physicality, frees the mind from the "barriers of sensibility," and causes us to "feel our superiority to nature within ourselves, and hence also to nature outside us" (112, 129). Since the sublime is an aesthetic judgment, not an "object of the senses," we feel it in the moment when the mind's rational powers surpass "the world of sense" and put nature to "use," verifying our "supersensible power" (106). In these early comics, Batman experiences and then embodies the sublime. Confronting irrational violence, he feels that his mind is superior to the physical world and then constantly reaffirms that superiority through explicit rationalizations. His enactment of sublimity affirms his rational power to arrange nature according to his ideas of justice. He hangs the monster not only because it is "necessary,"

but also because he has a moral imperative to do so.

His enactment of violence separates the animal from the man by uncoupling Batman from the physical realities of his violent decisions. To distinguish himself from the monsters that use their physical bodies in senseless destruction, Batman marks his violence as rational. Rational violence is useful violence; it maintains the border between order and chaos and upholds law. And it is Batman's rationality, not his physical body, that constitutes his effectiveness as a hero. In these early comics, Gothamites are skeptical of Batman's strangely clad, powerfully violent body, and citizens and police work together to pursue the superhero and end vigilante justice. They begin to accept his presence as an organizing force only when he repetitively executes a sublime logic. Batman can always justify his violence, and it is only through these justifications that he can convince others of his morality.

But the comic corrodes Batman's moral certainty when it assigns comparable rational power to the villains, as it does with Dr. Hugo Strange who uses his scientific knowledge to manipulate and subjugate an entire city. In contrast to his mutant creations, Hugo Strange is a "man," a "genius," an "evil genius," and a "fiend," and his brand of villainy suggests that rationality might be treacherous and unstable, making him the "biggest monster of them all." The obvious formal similarities between heroes and villains – they all dress in costume, maintain dual identities, stalk Gotham at night, utilize futuristic technology, and speak in puns and clichés – contribute to the comic's underlying distrust of rationality and its consequences. In association with criminality, Batman's ethics become arbitrary, his heroism violent and often excessive. The fundamental difference between Batman and his enemies is the superhero's embodiment

of a sublime logic to resolve the moral ambiguity of his vigilantism. Depicting Batman's sublime experience, the comic both justifies and critiques Batman's violence, marking the potential of human mastery over the physical as simultaneously powerfully effective and easily corruptible.

Many Batman scholars describe the hero as more violent, cynical, and perhaps amoral than his superhero compatriots. Both popular and scholarly critics through seventy-seven years of *Batman* comics have continually referred to the hero as "dark," perhaps adopting the language of the comics that call the hero the "Dark Knight" or the "Black Knight." Greg Klock argues that Batman is evidence of Bruce Wayne's "dark side" (123), and Terrence R. Wandtke agrees that the character is "darker" than other superheroes (35). Rick Marschall writes that the character "come[s] out of the shadows" and "embodie[s] the darker elements of the city through which he stalk[s]" (3). Dick Giordano, a DC artist, claims that Batman harbors "an emotion that is primal and timeless and dark. The Batman does what he does for himself, for *his* needs. That society gains from his actions is incidental" (Pearson and Uricchio 194; original emphasis). These critics agree that Batman expresses a dual identity, split between animal and human, sane and insane, and they most often identify his bestial, insane side as the source of his moral ambiguity.[4] Wearing a "dark, bat-like costume," the character evokes the supernatural in his "maniacal compulsion," uncomfortably blending himself with "an animal that dwells in darkness" (Reynolds 26, Marschall 5, Uricchio 123). But these early comics depict a judicious hero whose sublime reaction to violence secures his authority over the physical world of Gotham. I agree with Scott Bukatman who claims that Batman's "dark ratiocinations" lead the hero to "summo[n] a . . . sublime terror" (182). Gotham is a

"concatenation of hidden spaces, corners, and traps. The city needs to be read, deciphered, made legible, and the one to do it lives among the bats in his own subterranean hideout" (182). Bukatman argues Batman's darkness derives from his obsessive, rational control, but never explains the hero's appeal or why Gothamites so readily accept his vigilantism as moral authority. Batman's ability to not only "summo[n]" the sublime, but rather embody a sublime logic helps to explain his enduring heroism.

"Darkness" is not a personality characteristic; it is an aesthetic quality that produces violent physical consequences. When critics use the term to explain Batman's vigilantism, they gloss over the process of ratiocination that constitutes the character's heroism. Batman's initial relationship to the sublime produced a tenuous moral authority that persists in endless iterations of the character throughout his seventy-seven-year history. These early Batman narratives celebrate the violence that facilitates exciting, escapist narratives, but they also critique the hero's justifications.

3.2 "A Third Menacing Figure"

Batman first appeared in *Detective Comics #27*, "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate" (published May, 1939). Kane and Finger introduce their hero as a dualistic figure who fits seamlessly into the criminal world even as he attempts to suppress it. The "Bat-man" is "mysterious and adventurous," interrupting criminal activity when he emerges out of the shadows. The very first appearance of Batman happens unexpectedly, or as Rick Marschall describes in his introduction to the DC Archives collection: "He came out of nowhere" (3). The first two pages of the issue contain no sign of the hero and

instead introduce a detective story through the point of view of Commissioner Gordon and his friend, Bruce Wayne. This first page layout is brightly colored, with lavender, yellow, red, and green dominating each frame as the two friends investigate a murder and robbery. The next page diverges from the familiar story when the art switches to a darker palette and Batman suddenly materializes at the top of the page. He stands static, arms folded, waiting for the two criminals that share his panel to notice him: "As the two men leer over their conquest, they do not notice a third menacing figure standing behind them…It is the 'Bat-man!'" Describing Batman as a "third menacing figure," the narration aligns him with the criminals. In the next frame he "lashes out with a terrific right." The narration refers to the right-handed punch as a "right," but his "right" is also a rational justification that produces and excuses his violence. The comic differentiates between the criminals and Batman by establishing his moral "right" to punish wrongdoing, but then shows the arbitrary quality of rationality when it presents the bodies of the murderers, splayed across the street, dead from the force of Batman's "right." When this first issue visually associates this character with darkness and violence it creates the impression of a mysterious, potentially wicked character. He steals the stolen object from the criminals, and escapes into the night with an ambiguous, "grim smile."

Batman finally rationalizes his violence at the end of the issue, but he fails to justify the extent of his violence. When he murders the murderers, he incorporates the same physical tactics as the villains. On the last page Batman throws a criminal into an "acid tank," represented as a completely black expanse, and declares it "a fitting ending for his kind." He then disappears through a skylight. Standing against the outline of the

moon, he appears in silhouette, resembling the form of a bat. From the first issue, Batman rationalizes violence through his split heroism. As a bat he kills people in horrific ways; as a man he justifies the animalistic behavior. Batman's heroism depends on his ability to determine and wield the "right" by means of a sublime logic that organizes nature according to the dictates of rationality.

3.3 Batman's Origin: A "Curious and Strange Scene"

These first issues establish Batman's affinity with the criminal underworld and his antagonistic relationship with the Gotham police department. It is not until the seventh issue that readers learn about the initial sublime catalyst that inspired Batman's vigilantism. "The Batman Wars Against the Dirigible of Doom" (*Detective Comics #33*; published November, 1939) depicts the traumatic childhood experience that forged the superhero. Walking outside after a movie, a young Bruce Wayne and his parents are confronted by a thief who demands Mrs. Wayne's pearl necklace. When Mr. Wayne refuses to relinquish the necklace, the thief shoots him and then shoots Mrs. Wayne to "shut [her] up." This is an act of violence so abrupt and confusing that it challenges Bruce's comprehensive abilities. As he looks at the figures of his parents lying in the streets of Gotham, "The boy's eyes are wide with terror and shock as the horrible scene is spread before him." ". . . Dead! They're d . . . Dead," he says. Confronted with this sudden loss and the image of his dead parents, Bruce struggles to articulate his feelings. The shadows in each frame that begin to engulf Bruce's face illustrate his inability to understand the overwhelming experience. One frame presents Bruce in a clear profile, free of shadows. He looks down at his parents' heavily obscured and shadowed bodies. In

the next frame Bruce is in close-up, eyes wide and tears pouring from his eyes, his parents now out of frame. His shadow in the bottom left corner starts to darken his face, blurring the edges of his form. Then the setting changes and Bruce kneels by his bed in a prayer position, hands clenched together. A candle lights the room, and the shadows divide his form in half, cutting him down the middle. The images and the narration mark this moment as a "curious and strange scene," while Bruce recites his vows, "And I swear by the spirits of my parents to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of my life warring on all criminals."

Experiencing the chaotic, violent, and seemingly inexplicable natural world, Bruce's powers of reason begin to detect the limitations of his sensible knowledge. He constructs a clear maxim to order his experience of nature, proving his control over the world outside himself. The shadows illustrate a conception of knowledge common in the Enlightenment era, depicting the natural world as the darkness that threatens to overpower the light of human reason. As Burke claims in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, "in utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us . . . wisdom can only act by guess . . . and he who would pray for something else towards his defence, is forced to pray for light" (130). Progressing from a long to medium to close perspective, each image in the sequence emphasizes the mental isolation Bruce experiences due to the death of his parents and his subsequent vow. The background moves from a blur of shadows and a skyline of hazy pink buildings – or, as Bukatman writes, "a city askew, defined by angular perspectives, impenetrable shadows, and grotesque inhabitants of the night" (181) – to a turquoise block of color, devoid of any distinguishing qualities. Conversely, the lines that construct

Bruce's face become more clear and detailed. As he witnesses his parents' death over the course of five panels, the setting becomes more abstract and the comic begins to explore Bruce's interiority, showing the emotional, and also logical, trajectory between his personal tragedy and his decision to become a vigilante.

Bruce's maxim does not tie him to a community that he seeks to protect from criminality, but instead, isolates him from the community by giving him a methodical, logical plan to achieve personal vengeance. He is overcome by an unrelenting, enduring desire to avenge his parents, and then manipulates that obsession into a moral creed. As a sublime embodiment, he comprehends the chaos of the natural world and then orders the world outside himself. The death of the Waynes pushes Bruce into this last shadowy frame, but Bruce's rational method for vengeance guarantees his permanent association with criminality.

3.4 Building a Superhero

Without his parents to help mold him into a functioning adult, a young Bruce must form his own body and mind into the body and mind of the Batman. In these few panels the narration and images work together to both explain and obscure the origin story. Over two panels that portray an unknown period of time, the narration states, "As the years pass, Bruce Wayne prepares himself for his career. He becomes a master scientist. Trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats."[5] Explaining how Bruce shapes his heroic body and mind, the narration attempts to remain logical: Batman supposedly studies, trains, and labors to form his physical body into a tool that may fulfill his moral maxim of vengeance. He "prepares"

and "trains" because he has "sw[orn] . . . to avenge."

But there are obvious gaps in this story. The narration recounts a seamless flow of events in Batman's training that span an indeterminate number of years, with phrases to mark time such as "as the years pass," "he becomes," and "until he is able." But the sequence omits crucial information about his regimen and education, and the images in each panel represent the mystery and impenetrable obscurity of Batman's construction. As Bruce Wayne changes from a small boy to an adult scientist and bodybuilder, the images emphasize the spontaneity of his transformation through stylized shapes and forms. A lamp illuminates Bruce as scientist, wafts of smoke circling his elaborate experiment. The background is black and yellow, devoid of any details and situating him in a nebulous space, divorced from concrete place and time. In the next panel, he mimics the stance of a circus strongman, hoisting an enormous barbell over his head with one hand. A burst of yellow across a bright red background surrounds him, as though the explosion emanates from his form. Though the narration claims that Bruce Wayne "trains his body to physical perfection until he is able to perform amazing athletic feats," the image suggests a sudden transformation, where heroism begins as an idea in the head of a small child and erupts onto the page in the body of a grown man. In the aftermath of his horrible tragedy, Bruce Wayne elucidates the power of the human will by mentally determining the shape and powers of his body. He demonstrates how a superhero might will himself into being by utilizing the logic of the sublime to order and structure the natural, physical world.

The story of Batman's origin is consistent with the logic of physical fitness and bodybuilding that informed a general trend in American culture at the beginning of the

century. Preaching the effects of positive thinking, discipline, and rationalization on the body, popular bodybuilders sold fitness regimes in the pages of magazines and comics. These advertisements look strikingly similar to the image of Bruce Wayne holding a barbell over his head, and promise any customer, regardless of current physical makeup, a body that looked just like a superhero's. Celebrities and business moguls like Bernarr MacFadden and Charles Atlas built their empires on their origin stories, claiming to have once been weak, bullied young men who, much like young Bruce Wayne, made the rational decision to refashion their bodies. Rationality can structure every aspect of the body. Chapters in MacFadden's book *Vitality Supreme* are entitled "Straightening and Strengthening the Spine," "Cleansing and Stimulating the Alimentary Canal," "How to Breathe," and "Strengthening the Stomach," illustrating how a fitness regime detailed every decision a person might make to "develop, expand and bring out these latent powers" (MacFadden xii). Each individual has access to a sublime body, and the "wonders of body building" and "mental control" can ensure the creation of that body (260, 239). The mind is a "master-force" that "works for good or for evil" when it makes informed decisions about exercise and nutrition (234-6). By organizing the body through rational powers, bodybuilding rejects the notion of a physically determined body. Appealing to people across gender and racial distinctions,[6] fitness regimes like these provide a way for rational thought to overcome the restrictions of physical boundaries, just as the Kantian sublime provides a way of overcoming sensible nature through rationality.

MacFadden directly contributed to the growth and aesthetics of comic books. Publishing magazines like *Physical Culture*, *True Story*, *True Confessions*, *Photoplay*,

and *Ghost Stories*, MacFadden ensured the popularity of pulp magazines, which led to the creation of superhero comics (Jones 54). Populating those magazines with images of muscular human forms and fitness regimes that emphasized the "intelligent application of the laws that control the culture of the physique," he inspired the look and structure of the superhero's body (MacFadden xi). As an orphan, outside the influence of any parental figure (the comics did not introduce Alfred, the avuncular butler, until April 1943), Bruce Wayne elucidates the power of the human will. In the aftermath of his horrible tragedy, he can follow the advice of popular bodybuilders and shape his body through mental determination, demonstrating how a superhero might will himself into being by utilizing the logic of the sublime to order and structure the natural, physical world.

3.5 A Terrifying Myth

While the images that depict Batman's training appear expressionistic and abstract, the comic reestablishes a realistic pattern of linearity, utilizing a traditional grid layout. The next three panels show a typical juxtaposition of perspectives that establishes setting, character development, and scene progression. The first image displays the details of Wayne manor, emphasizing the rich tapestries and luxuriously high ceilings. The next image shows Bruce in close-up, thinking through the problem of his disguise out loud, "Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot. So my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible...." A bat appears at the window in the next frame, inspiring Bruce Wayne's idea for his alter ego. Western cultures frequently associate the bat with disturbing supernatural entities, so Bruce's choice serves his desire to terrify. He turns something physical – a wild animal –

into something symbolic – the terrifying myth – and demonstrates his rational power over the natural world. When he fashions his body and mind into that of a superhero, the panels resist continuity through disparate, stylized images. When the comic reestablishes continuity through conventional means of representation, it depicts the triumph of rationality in sublime experience. Batman emerges from his origin as a hero, able to control his own representation to the criminal world. As a newly-constituted superhero, Batman may, as Kant says, "feel [his] superiority to nature within [himself], and hence also to nature outside [him]" (129). Employing the aesthetic and demeanor of a bat, Batman displays his interior experience of the sublime on the surface of his body.[7]

By mimicking the figure of the bat, he identifies himself as a terrorist: "I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible." As in the lynching scene in "The Giants of Dr. Hugo Strange," Batman's rationale for terrorizing, his "warring on all criminals," constitutes his shadowy, murderous, violent persona as necessary and just. But the narrator in this scene seems skeptical about Bruce's motivations: "And thus is born this weird figure of the dark…This avenger of evil, 'The Batman.'" The narrator describes Batman as "weird"; at other moments he is "eerie," "mysterious," "strange," a "menace," and a "cowled shadow" who "prowls through the night preying upon the criminal parasite."[8] While Batman provides justifications for violence, the narration targets Batman's physical presence. If the criminal is a "parasite" and Batman "preys" on the parasite, then this narration identifies Batman as a parasite himself, gratifying his desire for vengeance by rationalizing his criminal behaviors.

The dark, animalistic, mysterious form of his costume serves a symbolic purpose, terrifying anyone who must interact with him, intimidating criminals and civilians alike.

This aesthetic affect initially aligns him with Gotham's criminal underbelly. Though the first narration in *Detective Comics #27* professes that "The 'Bat-Man' fight[s] for righteousness by battl[ing] against the evil forces of society," everyone who encounters the "mysterious and adventurous figure" mistakes him for a criminal. In this first issue Commissioner Gordon spots the vigilante fleeing the scene of a crime and yells, "'It's the Bat-man! Get him!'" and by the second issue, *Detective Comics #28* (published June 1939), the "horrified" police shoot at the hero, believing him to be a jewel thief. As a vigilante, Batman acts without any official legal authority, and must convince the citizens of Gotham that he can be a force of terror and horror, violently acting out his will while still functioning as a hero. Jared Gardner calls comics "experiments with mass-mediated personality – a personality that emerges through serial repetition" (14). Batman begins his heroism as a reaction against sublime violence then embodies the sublime by serially reenacting rationality's domination of sensibility. Through repetition, *Batman* comics create a character that becomes familiar to Gothamites and readers alike, and after months of serialized stories, Gothamites eventually accept Batman's violence as a way to organize and control a sublime world. By the 1940s, Batman had become an accepted presence in Gotham, with bystanders, police officers, and businessmen all working together to uphold his power. These citizens excuse his violence as an implementation of that power in which they believe.

3.6 "Supreme Egotist[s]": Batman vs. The Joker

After Batman becomes a familiar, even commonplace, hero, the comics begin introducing recurring villains like the Joker, Penguin, and Cat Woman to maintain

Batman's heroism while simultaneously critiquing his violence. Like Batman, recurring villains dress in outrageous, unnerving costumes and employ the use of doubled, secret identities to rationally restructure the city according to their wills.[9] But unlike Batman, villains cannot successfully use the logic of the sublime to resolve and justify moral ambiguity.

The comic frequently represents two types of villains. Some villains mimic Dr. Strange: cerebral and cunning, but also sickly and weak. Other villains are similar to the "monsters" Dr. Strange invents: physically imposing, but brainless, mechanical, and primal. Giant apes, hypnotized women, werewolves, and mindless thugs are merely physical manifestations of evil motivations, pawns for the more nefarious villains. Batman easily eliminates these imbeciles, but the evil geniuses present more of a challenge, repeatedly escaping Batman's grasp. He rarely engages recurring characters in physical battle, but rather confronts their taller, heftier henchmen. Encompassing both the physical prowess to fight the monsters, and the justifications for his behaviors, Batman exists on the border between the two kinds of villains, slipping between monster, criminal mastermind, and superhero. The same rational power that authorizes his violence is also the quality he shares with Gotham's most effective criminals, suggesting that there is something ironic and unseemly about his heroism. As readers, we are most uncomfortable with Batman's hunger for vengeance when he makes use of physical nature and then quickly justifies any violent behaviors. When he cynically throws a criminal in an acid tank and claims it is a "fitting ending," we recognize the irony in his vigilantism. But it is his will towards vengeance and his physical ability to make use of nature that constitutes his superheroic and sublime identity. The comic shares this

discomfort with the reader and accentuates Batman's ambiguous heroism through his similarities with the villains he fights. These fights with the recurring villains are battles of wit. The Scarecrow, the Joker, the Riddler, the Mad Hatter, and others intentionally leave clues at the scenes of their crimes, inviting Batman to engage them in trickery rather than physical violence.

In *Detective Comics #71*, "A Crime a Day!" (published January 1943), Batman and his most notorious nemesis, the Joker, confront each other in one of these battles of wits. The issue begins with an ad in a newspaper broadcasting Batman's lecture series on crime solving. In his address, Batman insists he is a detective and teaches the public about "clues…These seemingly small details that solve big crime!..." He wants to establish himself with the public as a rational hero who must interpret crime scenes and provide logical conclusions. Someone from the audience asks "How about the Joker? He leaves clues to trip him[self] up! Why?" And Batman replies, "The Joker is tricky, cunning…A supreme egotist advertising his crimes like a fool…Leaves clues. Clues that defeat him! And so I always win, while he loses…All because of his conceit." The audience laughs at this insult to the Joker, and the next day a cartoon appears in the paper that mocks the Joker's large ego. The cartoon depicts the Joker with a large balloon head, ready to explode with the caption "'Look out, Joker! Big heads burst very easily!'" To ensure his popularity, Batman demonstrates his rational powers in his lectures, building a reputation across various forms of media and inspiring his fans to participate in intertextual exchanges. As the citizens of Gotham produce their own texts to rationalize Batman's violence, they grant the hero even more power over their community.

Though the newspaper cartoonist seems to agree with Batman's description of the

Joker as an "egotist," "A Crime a Day!" critiques this interpretation. When Batman hurls his insult about the Joker, he appears as just a head, surrounded by a yellow spotlight and a red circle, reminiscent of a target with Batman's face in the middle. While calling the Joker an egotist, Batman is at the center of a stage, and then the center of a frame, making claims to his own importance and exhibiting himself to the public. As a vigilante, Batman acts outside the law, just as the Joker does.[10] So, according to the law that prohibits assault and vigilantism, both the Joker and Batman are criminals. Batman's lecture series, which he advertises in newspapers and on posters, leaves obvious clues about his whereabouts and criminal activities. Though he claims that the Joker loses because of his "conceit," Batman also makes himself vulnerable through his own "egotism" and "conceit." If, at any time, the public loses their trust and demands legal retribution for his vigilantism, Batman can no longer function heroically. Like his costumed enemies, he, too, would become a villain. But as long as the crowd of fans accepts his sublime authority as logical and moral, they likewise sanction his heroism. This scene mocks the tenuous balance between Batman and his fans, suggesting that his public performance might ensure his popularity, but it also reiterates the fragility of Batman's social position. From their first appearances in the 1930s, critics have been suspicious of superheroes' ability to bypass legality, sometimes claiming that these heroes mimic fascist dictators,[11] but *Batman* comics demonstrate the power of the populace to affect change, both in the narrative and the publishing world where children and adults alike bought these comics at an astonishing rate.[12]

Batman's experience of the sublime fuels his tenacity, and he sustains his popularity by performing the logic of the sublime. His heroism depends on his ability to

use his brilliant mind to rationalize his violence, and then to display that process to the citizens of Gotham. Without "egotism" and "conceit," Batman could not perpetrate unlawful, possibly immoral violence, and, therefore, could not qualify as a superhero. Yet while Batman's conceit works to save the public from villains like the Joker, it also frequently puts the public in danger. By establishing this paradox, the comics display an ambiguity at the center of Batman's heroism. When Batman taunts the Joker, his taunts directly inspire the Joker to commit intricate, damaging criminal acts. The Joker calls his style of mischievous criminality "beat[ing] the Batman at his own game!" and identifies his motivation as contingent on the existence of the costumed hero. He plays a "game" with Batman – one that Batman started and defined. "I'm going to make Batman the fool…I'm going to shame him…Shame him into quitting!" The Joker understands Batman's desire for fame and the hero's concern with reputation. He knows that threatening Batman's reputation will be more damaging to the hero than any physical confrontation could be ("Shooting him would only make him more of a hero, a martyr!") so he manipulates Batman's audience. Were the Joker to discredit Batman's powers of reason, he would undermine the basic structure of Batman's authority, denying Batman access to the sublime logic that upholds heroic power. Batman would have no choice but to quit when the citizens of Gotham no longer accepted him as heroic. So the Joker orchestrates a series of crimes that will manipulate Batman's image and reputation. He leaves clues at the scene of each of his crimes and asks Batman to find him and stop him. When Batman fails to understand the Joker's clues, the public starts to think of the hero as incompetent and "fool[ish]."

For a few panels, it appears that the Joker has won the game. The cartoonist from

the newspaper now depicts Batman as mentally inferior to his nemesis, and, shocked by this cartoon commentary, Batman is just as distraught by a tarnished reputation as the Joker. The image shows the Joker pulling a rug from underneath a diminished, sweating and disoriented Batman while the caption asks, "Is the Batman slipping?" The Joker laughs in the cartoon while he easily disarms Batman and proves that his strategic criminality is more powerful than Batman's rational heroism. The cartoon depicts Batman physically slipping on a rug, and a pun conveys the metaphorical use of the term "slipping" to accentuate his mental incompetence and his loss of the foundation of his heroism. Backstage, at another of his lectures, he laments, "The Joker's beating me at every turn! . . . Maybe…Maybe they're right! Maybe I *am* slipping! Maybe I ought to quit!" Throughout the comics Batman suffers physical pain. In every issue his violence injures or seriously threatens his body in some way. But when the Joker harms his reputation in this issue, Batman questions his mental competency and, thus, his entire heroic purpose. His resolve for vengeance, which has always seemed so consistent and clear until this point, wavers, and these sudden insecurities reveal that he prioritizes his rational over his physical abilities. His ability to anticipate criminal actions, and then to justify his violent response is an essential aspect of his own sense of his mission and identity as the Batman, defender of Gotham.

Doubting himself, Batman proves the Joker's power over him. Though skinny, weak, and physically unskilled, the Joker can manipulate the public while Batman can only react defensively. But ultimately, Batman's rationality triumphs. The Joker leaves a clue that claims that in his next crime he will "take the rap." Batman successfully interprets the pun, substituting "rap" for "wrap," and catches the Joker stealing a

woman's fur coat. "A fur wrap! That's it! The Joker tried to outfox us!" Through linguistic skills and intelligence, not physical confrontation, Batman tracks the Joker and anticipates his actions. Finally proving his rational superiority, Batman can now physically attack the Joker and stop criminality. The last panel of the issue is another cartoon from the newspaper, an image of Batman punching Joker in the face, stars floating around the villain's head. Batman reintroduces his physical superiority in this last scene, but the joy of the Joker's defeat lies in Batman's mental superiority as a detective. He can now take the stage of his lecture series with pride, showing the way that his anticipation of criminality, his rationality, justifies his physical confinement of the Joker.

Though Batman ultimately triumphs in this – and every – issue, the comics identify his concern with his public image and his ability to manipulate the public as a character flaw. The comics depict and serially reassert Batman's superior strength by ending every issue in a physical confrontation that he always dominates. In contrast, they identify his rationality as potentially inadequate by predicating his heroic potency on something as fragile and capricious as public approval. Batman reveals a desperate need for acceptance when he continually tries to justify his heroism. His selfish and obsessive desire to avenge his parents' death puts the public at risk, but he convinces his audience that he is a solution to criminal violence by perpetrating rational violence. Creating villainous characters that are also insecure, selfish and violent, the comics suggest that the border between heroes and villains is tenuous. When both heroes and villains use rationality as a tool for manipulation, they demonstrate their similarities and dependence on each other.

To resolve this moral ambiguity, Batman must ensure public approval by embodying a sublime aesthetic. Constantly reasserting his authority as a self-made hero, he demonstrates his rational ability to control Gotham through violence, using public arenas like the lecture hall to explain the logic of any seemingly inexplicable crime. The images within the images in this issue, the newspaper cartoons within the comic book, show the way popular attitudes towards superheroes might change at any time, depending on a variety of cultural, social, and political circumstances. Just as newspaper cartoonists publish images that serve political objectives, Batman performs the sublime as a rhetorical tool, convincing citizens that he has the moral, if not legal, authority to control them. Through this moment of metafiction, the *Batman* comics reveal their own function as mythic and political rhetoric, critiquing both Batman's and also their own power.

3.7 Conclusion

In *Detective Comics #71* Batman's vulnerability manifests when he doubts his popularity. Knowing that the public has become suspicious of his authority, he believes he cannot act violently because he can no longer act heroically. Violence is merely a way for Batman to maintain power, while his justifications for violence establish his power. In *On Violence,* Hannah Arendt articulates the difference between power and violence. According to Arendt, power is not indistinguishable from violence, does not necessarily lead to violence, and does not necessitate violence. Rather, power is "the human ability . . . to act in concert" (44). Someone can achieve power only by convincing a majority of people to uphold that power. "Power always stands in need of numbers, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements" (42). While the

Joker can commit violent acts without the consensus of an observant public (his privilege as a villain), Batman can perpetrate violence only as long as Gotham believes him to be acting according to their communal good. Both the Joker and Batman possess what Arendt would call "strength," an individual's physical capabilities, but "the strongest individual can always be overpowered by the many" (44). By convincing the people of Gotham of his righteousness, Batman convinces them that he has "authority," and "the greatest enemy of authority . . . is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter" (45). Batman seems to recognize this principle of violence when he balks at the audience's laughter during his lectures on detective work. Though the protection of Gotham and its citizens is not a priority in his original creed (he merely wants to achieve revenge for what criminals have done to his parents), he still orchestrates a performative lecture series to convince people of his authority. By gaining power, by convincing citizens that he may act outside the law for their own good, he ensures his authority to act violently, as long as he can rationally justify the violence as an extension of his power.

The Joker always loses against Batman, not because Batman is stronger, but because Batman has more power. Establishing himself as the hero of Gotham, creating a recognizable symbol and costume for himself, and convincing journalists and cartoonists to portray him heroically, Batman ensures his own power. He uses the same tactics as the Joker, the tactics that we recognize make the Joker villainous because of their manipulative flavor, to achieve his own goals. By elevating the rational above the physical, Batman justifies his violent actions by separating his motivations from their physical consequences**.** Both the hero and his villains want to control their natural inclinations towards violence, but they do not want to abandon violence as a means of

imposing their will. Instead, they invent rationalizations that might elevate them above the physical in a way that Kant describes as sublime. Sublime man, supersensible and independent of the world, can make use of the world according to his whims, but only when others accept this sublime logic as a sufficient justification for violence. Without public authorization, and violently using and abusing nature to achieve his personal goals, a superhero can resemble a villain. By separating the physicality of violence from the rationales for that violence, the *Batman* comics suggest that man manufactures and upholds the division and that we might find sublimity in the shadows rather than in the light of reason.

3.8 Notes

[1] Comics authorship in the 1930s and 1940s is notoriously difficult to determine. Comics were produced piecemeal, so historians must guess at who produced which work. Bob Kane took sole credit for the *Batman* comics until 1964 when artist Carmine Infantino demanded credit for his own work (Brooker 252). Historians now believe that Bill Finger created the character with Kane, contributing many of the most iconic stories. Jerry Robinson worked as an illustrator and inker with George Roussos and other artists whose names have been lost over time (Jones 152).

[2] The first *Batman* comics did hyphenate his name. "The Bat-man" became "Batman" in *Detective Comics #29* (published July, 1939).

[3] Jones, Bongco, Wandtke, Pearson, Uricchio, Brooker, Daniels, Reynolds, Coogan, and others continually refer to Batman as a "superhero." In his memoir, *Batman and Me*, Bob Kane also calls his character a superhero, though he admits that Bill Finger's contributions "turned [Batman] into a scientific detective" (43).

[4] Andreas Reichstein compares Batman to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, because they "are both fictional characters and are both figures with *alter egos* which they change into more or less deliberately" (329; original emphasis).

[5] Similar to Sergei Eisenstein's description of montage in film, the images jump from one setting and time to the next. Scott McCloud calls this reading process "closure" (92). Jared Gardner and Douglas Wolk agree with McCloud that closure is integral to the experience of reading comics (Wolk 133), but Gardner claims that closure is never quite achieved because comics are "always rooted in the narrative structure of shocks, fragments, and discontinuities" (5).

[6] MacFadden was especially concerned with female fitness, arguing for the importance of strength and physical capabilities for women as well as men in books like *The Athlete's Conquest: The Romance of an Athlete* and *Preparing for Motherhood: A Guide for the Expectant Mother to Her Care and Training*.

[7] The superhero's costume is a consistent feature of the genre. Using identifiable and marketable shapes and colors, the hero can distinguish himself as a hero, and, especially, as a symbolic hero. See Coogan, McCloud, or Reynolds for more on symbolic costumes.

[8] These descriptions of Batman are found in *Detective Comics* issues #28, #30, #33, and #37.

[9] Many critics have commented on the similarities between Batman and the villains he fights, suggesting a symbiotic relationship (Garrett 94, Sharett 36, Collins 168, Tyree 32). Ultimately, these scholars determine that Batman differs from the villains he fights because Batman is a force for order and the villains are a source for disorder. But in this paper I claim that Batman's rationality mirrors the rationality of his villains, not because they are both insane, but because they both fight for their own, specific brand of order.

[10] This is a popular generic convention: "The superhero's goal is the greater good of humanity and his society, which he pursues through his own interpretation of right and law, and his application of might to support that interpretation. Superheroes are willing and able to violate the civil and legal rights of others because of their code" (Coogan 112).

[11] For examples of this common criticism through history see Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, Walter J. Ong's "Comics and the Super State," or John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett's *The Myth of the American Superhero*.

[12] Around fifteen million comic books were sold a month by 1940, making them the most popular form of entertainment in America (Jones 170).

CHAPTER 4

"A FABULOUS INDIVIDUAL": THE LONE RANGER AND THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

4.1 The Western Superhero

In the fourth episode of *The Lone Ranger*, the titular hero, the so-called "fabulous individual" of the American West, cements his status as the solitary man who inspires communal loyalties. The episode, called "Legion of Old Timers" (aired October 6, 1949), features the Lone Ranger and his Native American sidekick, Tonto, fighting greedy criminals alongside a posse of elderly Westerners. The episode opens with the most prosperous and successful ranch in Mesa County, the Circle K Ranch, in a moment of transition. The owner of the ranch has died, and his "young and inexperienced son is returning from the East to take charge." Eastern society has seemingly emasculated the well-dressed, baby-faced son, causing him to feel like a "regular tenderfoot," and leaving the ranch under the protection of an elderly groundskeeper. As individuals, both the son and the groundskeeper are incapable of protecting their piece of this unruly Western landscape, and the ranch is primed for a burly, violent opportunist, Red Devers, to confiscate and sell it. When the Lone Ranger learns that the Circle K Ranch is on the market, he is immediately suspicious, knowing of the son's inexperience, Red's criminality, and the land's inherent worth. After a quick investigation, he rounds up a

gang of "old timers" to reclaim the ranch. Unlike the younger men in the area, the elderly Westerners are dedicated to the land that they have helped cultivate and are, according to the groundskeeper, "scared of nothin'."

Though the Ranger defeats Red in a fistfight (while their guns lie safely in their holsters), he and Tonto allow the "old timers" to subdue the rest of the criminal gang. Red jeers at "those old has-beens," but the Ranger claims, "it's not strength. . . . It's courage" that will win the fight. The Ranger and Tonto do not want to "spoil" the old timers' "fun," so they stand just behind the criminals, stealthily disarming or debilitating the enemy while the elderly men punch, kick, and head-butt their way to victory. For their efforts, the old timers do not want a reward, but "just good ol', plain, honest work," and the son promises to employ all of them. Rather than the traditional standoff between a superhero and villain, this Western ends in pedagogy, with the Ranger teaching the elderly their own efficacy, and inspiring the younger generation to respect these early Western settlers. Then, before anyone has a chance to thank the Lone Ranger and Tonto for their involvement, the heroes disappear into the distance, the Ranger waving his hat and calling out his catchphrase: "Hi-yo Silver! Away!"

This story employs a common template for a *Lone Ranger* episode: capitalistic greed and effete inadequacy combine to threaten a Western community, which motivates the Lone Ranger to contain the chaotic violence and instruct the community on proper behavior. The Ranger always acts as an individualistic hero, violently enforcing his own sense of right and wrong regardless of the legal ramifications; in this episode he investigates and punishes crime without ever considering contacting the sheriff or arresting the criminals. But though he dispenses justice according to his will, he always

acts on behalf of the settlers, modeling how individualized violence upholds community values. As both a Texas Ranger and a vigilante hero, he literalizes the position of every American citizen who must envision their individuality as a privilege and function of state power. The elderly settlers in this episode understand that they must fight for the land they have worked so hard to cultivate and contain, and they exhibit the efficacy of their violence to the "tender foot" from the East. Picking up a gun at the end of the episode, the new owner of the Circle K Ranch accepts that his position as a Western landowner necessitates this precarious relationship to established law and order.

Though the images and themes in the program align the Ranger with other generic Western heroes, his unique and impossible abilities to traverse the entire Western landscape and root out evildoers suggest that he is also a superhero. His tendency to slip in and out of perception, appearing only to those who deserve help or retribution, his masked costume, and his exceptional, near magical marksmanship bring him closer in representation to characters like The Shadow or Batman than to Gene Autry or John Wayne. And as a superhero, a character who utilizes powers beyond the capabilities of humanity, he must justify the violent actions that establish his authority and heroism. The Ranger consistently acts unilaterally, imposing himself as a leader, teacher, lawmaker and lawbreaker throughout the West. But though he works without any democratic jurisdiction, he reinstates American democracy through an embodiment of the sublime. Accepting the Ranger's heroism as both individual and universal, each Western citizen may refashion his own relationship to the American landscape he settles.

America, understanding itself as naturally superior, has a long history of evoking sublime aesthetics to impose and justify state power.[1] Rhetoric that espouses American

exceptionalism often uses the sublime landscape to prove the country's moral and physical superiority to other nations. As an individual working from within state-sponsored power, the Lone Ranger interacts with the sublime American landscape and demonstrates the great potential of the American citizen in an expanding national setting. In *The Critique of Judgment* Kant argues that the sublime is the site of conflict between reason and imagination, in which reason demonstrates its ability to understand concepts outside the realm of the sensible. Moving through and engaging with the natural landscape of the American West, the Lone Ranger embodies this sublime logic. Rejecting any sensible reality and consequences, he represents the power of human reason to tame and discipline the physical world. He mitigates the citizen's tumultuous and disorienting political position when, as an autonomous subject, he controls the overwhelmingly powerful and vast Western landscape. Easing the political tension between subjects and leaders, the Ranger models the power and national duty of each individual to effect change in his natural environment.

Chadwick Allen also argues that the Lone Ranger is the model for an "exemplary American" whose heroism invites identification and a "sense of collaboration" ("Sight" 124, 126): ". . . listeners are encouraged to see themselves behind the mask, to see themselves as mysterious agents of America's civilizing and civic power" (126). Kip Anthony Wedel agrees that the Ranger is an "ideal American" who "privilege[s] national identities over local differences" (33, 45). Examining the character through a religious lens, he believes the Ranger demonstrates how to "liv[e] in concert with God's moral order" (33). And Michael Ray Fitzgerald also argues that the program contains religious undertones, but claims that the Ranger is representative of a "savior" – not a subject –

who arrives in the West to impose "Anglo-American jurisprudence" as the only "legitimate law" (99, 95). All of these critics argue that the Ranger has a supernatural ability to control and inspire his community. And while I agree that the Ranger models an ideal relationship between citizen, local government, and nation, I believe that he derives his authority from the sublime landscape rather than the divine. It is this hierarchal, overt relationship with the American West that proves his superiority as a national citizen, and models the resolution between hegemonic power and individual autonomy. Allen claims it is the program's "interracial partnership" that proves the "malleability" of "dominant U.S. political and culture power" ("Hero" 616). I agree that the Ranger and Tonto's "reciprocal *and* hierarchical" relationship promotes national rather than local loyalties (619-20), but I believe this relationship is founded in the Kantian logic of the sublime, which most often reduces Tonto to a symbol of the natural American West. An intrinsic part of a distinct landscape, Tonto is the local that the Ranger must transcend; rather than form a "partnership," the Ranger incorporates the Native American into his sublime justification for violent settlement.

4.2 The Lone Ranger's Mythical American West

Constructing narratives about the invasion and settlement of the American West, Westerns always explore the ways American exceptionalism depends on the physical realities of space and place. Though there were early Westerns that took less jingoistic positions, in the 1930s through the 1950s, when *The Lone Ranger* first gained popularity in radio, film, comic books, newspaper strips, and pulp novels, the genre usually represented heroes that claimed overt allegiance to the nation-state by representing their

values as inherently and inevitably state-sponsored. Propagating myths about Manifest Destiny as a facilitator for the "American Dream," the state seeks to expand its power through acquisition, spreading social influence and governmental controls through new landscapes and cultures.[2] Westerns, as popular texts, support the dispersion of American morality through the state's growing sphere of influence. Nostalgically interacting with the past, these Western heroes framed Manifest Destiny as a product of fate: determined and inarguably beneficial. As Richard Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation*, Western texts reinforce a degrading "American spirit" by returning to a "more primitive or 'natural'" environment and imposing violent justice on those who threaten it, becoming an example of "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin 10-12). By reenacting justice through a series of episodes over time, the Lone Ranger justifies the violence in America's past by transforming it into the symbolic violence that brought peace and community to the West (13).

Unlike other popular superheroes of the period, the Lone Ranger's origin story remained relatively consistent throughout his representation in various mediums. Beginning in 1933, *The Lone Ranger* radio serial quickly became a popular phenomenon. At the height of the Great Depression, the Ranger represented a heroic, national past, in which supernaturally powerful individuals forged a capable and successful sovereignty. The origin, which the program developed across a number of episodes, depicts the Lone Ranger rising from a near-death experience, literally from the grave, and using his new position as a mythic force to anonymously order and control a chaotic world. Relying on the Ranger's consistent and unambiguous authority, *The Lone Ranger* offered a series of narratives that continued to reinforce American superiority week after week, employing

images of the American West to remind the country of its previous conquests. Subsequent iterations of the hero in comics, pulp novels, and television reiterated the Ranger's absolute, unwavering jurisdiction in the West through the origin, retelling the details of the Ranger's mythopoeic resurrection. More recent versions of the story subvert or critique the Ranger's hierarchical and often racist authority, often by refiguring his relationship to Tonto. Though these texts occasionally garner some critical respect, popular audiences have not responded with any enthusiasm and the efforts have been deemed commercial failures.[3] Unlike other superheroes, whose fragmented and contradictory origin stories inspire endless variations, successful versions of the Lone Ranger consistently impose order on the American Western landscape, nostalgically reinforcing the imperial power of a nation, often when its capabilities seem especially precarious.

The Lone Ranger derives his heroic authority from his dominant relationship to the landscape he inhabits, an attitude common in early American texts. The belief that the new landscape offered settlers a unique opportunity to experience a sublime aesthetic began with the country's earliest writers. The American landscape was beautiful, savage, wild, and uncultivated, what Thomas Jefferson called "wild and tremendous," and what William Bradford called "a hideous and desolate wilderness" (Jefferson 21; Bradford 33). In his description of the voyage to the continent, Bradford cites divine providence and self-sufficiency as qualities that kept the settlers alive in the "sundry of . . . storms," "sharp and violent" winters, and "woods and thickets" that "represented a wild and savage hue" (29-31). He praised American pilgrims who use "their own liberty, for none had power to command them" as the country began to define itself as a nation (32).

Crevecoeur called the settlers "a people of cultivators" and "tillers of the earth" who organize the "wild, woody, and uncultivated" land with a "spirit of industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself" (895). In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson studies the natural landscape as it relates to settlement and navigation, arguing that the American landscape will "turn all our citizens to the cultivation of the earth; and . . . cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens" (181). These writers argue that individuality and independence enables each citizen to conquer and control sublime nature, mapping, farming, and using the land for their civilizing purposes.[4]

These descriptions of settlement turn aesthetic response into justifiable action, where settlers should and must use the land for their own survival and for the survival of the nation.[5] Howard Horwitz identifies an American sublime that empties the Kantian aesthetic of all anxiety and presents an "easeful assimilation of wildness as a metaphor for mind" (32). 19th-century American texts appropriate nature as an instrument for transcendence and "an intimation of moral empowerment" (33). As Rob Wilson writes, "This discourse of the American sublime materialized national power into credible forms and shared terms that, in effect, conscripted citizens into a dynamic of possessive individualism that insured the industrial incorporation of the country" (207).[6] Writers through the 19th-century increasingly moved these conversations westward, identifying the American West as wild, uncivilized country, open for American settlers to take advantage of its resources. While Frederick Jackson Turner cautioned that, initially, "the wilderness masters the colonist," and "the environment is at first too strong for the man," nevertheless, "little by little he transforms the wilderness" and the result is a "new

product that is American" (20). Making arguments for uniquely American attitudes and values, writers in the first half of the 20th century continued to express the idea that "humans can master the world – of nature and of humans – around them" (Limerick 29). In their efforts to control water sources, migration patterns, national parks, and sexual practices, settlers in the American West tried to manage the land by mapping, studying, and manipulating the landscape at both the macro and micro levels (Limerick 55).

The Lone Ranger regulates a mythical and nostalgic Western landscape to condone contemporary U.S. global politics.[7] While many Western texts celebrate outlaw, rebel, and criminal antiheroes, Lone Ranger narratives belabor the hero's cooperative relationship with the law. Though he must occasionally defy legal regulations to enact his brand of heroism, his Texas Ranger title and uniform officially associates him with government control. The Lone Ranger blurs the boundaries between lawful violence and vigilante justice. As a liminal hero, he ignores certain democratically determined restrictions and enjoys free mobility through American settings – both the domestic sites of cities and towns, and the more exotic locales of the American West. The government-sanctioned Texas Rangers inaugurate and facilitate the Lone Ranger's special abilities. But though his position with the Texas Rangers establishes his legal authority, the Ranger frequently finds himself in opposition to other lawmen, breaking the chain of command by enacting his own interpretation of American values.[8] While Superman's relationship to the sublime changes his allegiance to his adopted country, he still consistently obeys his own personal maxim. In contrast, the Lone Ranger believes in a morality sponsored by the American government. State power inspires and enables the Lone Ranger's vigilantism, even as he acts illegally and forms uncomfortable relationships with

democratically elected leaders.

4.3 Exceptional American Spirit

Every episode of *The Lone Ranger* television series begins the same way. A burst of gunfire blasts over the finale of the "William Tell Overture" as the Ranger, wearing a Texas Rangers uniform and a black mask, gallops across the iconic landscape of the American West. He yells, "Hi-yo Silver! Away!" and the announcer breathlessly describes the image: "A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust, and a hearty 'Hi-yo, Silver': the Lone Ranger!"

The scene begins in motion. The horse's hair flies backwards and the Ranger races at a breakneck gallop as the frame centers the human figure, panning through the setting with the Ranger. We see magnificent, pine-studded mountains in the background, but the path before the Ranger is clear prairie, free of obstacles. The Ranger's relationship to his environment is immediately hierarchical. Though the American West is stunning, diverse, and even overwhelming, the Ranger navigates it with ease, controlling his steady motion through the terrain that frames him as an individual subject. The superimposed title, *The Lone Ranger*, appears directly over the form of the Ranger, in the center of the frame, highlighting his solitude and establishing his control of the narrative and setting.

With determination on his face, the Lone Ranger looks straight ahead, presumably at some unknown object in the distance, and removes his gun from his holster. Taking aim, the Ranger fires at a subject or object the viewer never sees. The sequence cuts to a long shot, again positioning the Ranger in the center of the frame, but with the subject

moving directly towards the camera. The Ranger now follows a designated path through the landscape as dust billows around him, obscuring the rocky crags on either side. Right before he reaches the camera, the Ranger turns abruptly, leaving the path and climbing up a hillside, forging his own way through the terrain. The camera follows him up the hill and cuts to a medium shot of the Ranger scanning the uninhabited landscape, his head and shoulders positioned in front of an open, cloud-studded sky. The last shot in the sequence moves back again, revealing Silver rearing up on hind legs as the Ranger pulls up on the reins. The horse appears to mimic the rock formation in the background, standing as tall as possible on top of a hill.[9]

The opening sequence represents the Lone Ranger's ability and desire to forge his own way through this Western landscape. Using the iconic images of the West – the stunning and imposing mountains, forests, prairies, and red rock formations of various and diverse ecosystems – the images recall the sublime natural habitats of American land. Uninhabited, desolate and lonely, these images depict an enormous and powerful place that might intimidate a lesser man. But the Lone Ranger, alone, vacates the path, scales the tallest peaks, surveys the land, and controls all who enter this territory through the use of his pistol. As the sole figure in the sequence, he determines our path through the landscape, suggesting that his interpretation of the West is the only interpretation that matters.

The Lone Ranger's ability to easily navigate the sublime American landscape suggests that nature is under the jurisdiction of the American hero.[10] He can make use of this natural setting and understand those sublime characteristics that otherwise appear overwhelming and chaotic. The Ranger, sitting atop and commanding Silver, is the

tallest, most imposing figure in the scene. As an individual centered inside the camera's frame throughout this introductory sequence, he utilizes both his natural surroundings and his mythic potential in the West.

The program assures the Ranger's authoritative relationship to the landscape when the narrator introduces the hero:

> This is a story of one of the most mysterious characters to appear in the early days of the West. He was a fabulous individual: a man whose presence brought fear to the lawless and hope to those who wanted to make this frontier land their home. He was known as the Lone Ranger.

The camera depicts the Ranger in a low-angle, medium shot as he surveys the landscape slowly, swiveling his neck side to side. The low angle allows the imposing, statuesque hero to dominate the frame, and the narrator affirms this preeminence when he claims that the Ranger is not only a mere "individual," but a "fabulous individual." The word "fabulous" denotes the Ranger's size in the frame – larger-than-life, "exaggerated" and "astonishing" – and his moral character as "amazingly good; wonderful" ("Fabulous"). The fabulous hero's "mysterious[ness]" and his sudden "appear[ance]" in the West shapes his mythic status – he is a supernatural authority and an "individual" who promotes the law for the purposes of settlement. The narrator bypasses any explanation of the Ranger's heroic means, and instead focuses on the end results. His mere "presence" evokes the aesthetic effects of "fear" and "hope," and the idea of the hero "known as the Lone Ranger" is enough to inspire the settlers to lawfully organize the landscape. Riding through the "frontier land," the Ranger aims his gun and shoots off-screen, defending settlers against the vague, shapeless idea of criminality, but the narration clearly states that his heroism depends on the aesthetic effect of his performance. His individuality does not protect citizens from criminals, but rather unites the community against the very

concept of disorder.

4.4 “Born of Necessity”: The Ranger’s Sublime Authority

The first episode, “Enter the Lone Ranger” (aired September 15, 1949), establishes mythic and generic jurisdiction for the hero who prepares the West for civilized, Anglo-American inhabitants. The episode begins with a map of the Southwest Territory. A thick line divides Mexico from the United States, claiming the annexed Texas as American territory. The map vaguely divides the rest of the states into demarcated grids, lightly crossed with natural features such as rivers and mountain ranges. A visual montage of settlers chopping wood, building homes, shooting guns, and hanging wanted posters appears superimposed over the map. The narrator says:

> Before his coming, this new land of the West was a wild, unruly territory into which brave American pioneers moved in covered wagons, on horseback, and afoot. Theirs was a rugged existence. For they not only had to settle and build; they had to fight. Here, beyond the reach of law and order, might was right. The best shot was the best man. Born of necessity in this chaotic period of Western expansion, an organization was developed to combat the evil forces of the times: an organization called The Texas Rangers.

Utilizing images, narration, and maps, the episode conflates a chronology of Western settlement into a short montage and neglects the historical and political circumstances. Though the map depicts Texas as a part of the American territories, the narrator claims these superimposed actions occurred shortly before and then after the formation of the Texas Rangers. Since Stephen F. Austin founded the Rangers in 1823, twelve years before the Texas Revolution and twenty-two years before the annexation of Texas, the juxtaposition of map and images is anachronistic.[11] Although the narrator claims that this landscape is “wild” and unruly, the episode foreshortens the historical perspective,

suggesting this land is already at least partially settled. According to the map, the U.S. has secured the borders and limits of the Western territories. The clearly defined border between the United States and Mexico implies that though the West is not completely tame, it is at least known. The country's limits are clear, and civilizing violence may transpire within the nation's own borders. Patricia Nelson Limerick claims that, "Western history is a story structured by the drawing of lines and the marking of borders," and *The Lone Ranger* articulates the way settlers saw "one appropriate way to treat land – divide it, distribute it, register it" into "manageable units of property" (55). The actions that overlay the image of the mapped territory depict Americans violently confronting each other inside the gridded, delineated landscape. Though representations of Native Americans were common and often offensive in early instances of Western genre texts, this introduction avoids engaging in complicated discourse about citizenship, authority and violence in this particular region. The map's clear borders advocate the legal right Americans have to exist in this space.

While the map establishes the legality of settlement, the images depict the physical consequences of the process. The narrator calls the violence between settlers "evil," a mythical rather than conditional attribute, implying that Western settlers were violent because humans are predisposed to violence. The law prevents people from acting according to their innate tendencies. When Western settlers moved beyond the easy reach of sovereign power, they sloughed the vulnerable veneer of civilization and reverted to social "chao[s]." Enter the Texas Rangers. They do not overtly control the settlement process; the settlers are still responsible for shaping and cultivating the land. Rather, they enable settlement through "organization." While natural impulses and physical violence

determine the settlers, the Rangers provide the rational constraints that order and shape the West. The narrator describes the Rangers as "courageous, straight-shooting men" who "maintai[n] law and order." The Rangers "ride alertly across a Western landscape," moving through the scenery of the West as they watch for any action that might disrupt the settlement process.

After the narration defines the Rangers' function, the episode illustrates their vulnerability. As a group, they are exposed and unwieldy, unable to move effectively through the wild landscape. The Rangers meet a wounded "half-breed," Collins, and follow him "up north, into the badlands" and the "rough country," hoping to catch the famous Cavendish Gang. Collins, with his vague, racialized identity and bleeding wounds, embodies disorganization, and is immediately suspicious according to traditional Western tropes.[12] As a troop, the Rangers are clumsy. They travel in a line on dirt paths, unable, like the Lone Ranger in the opening sequence, to suddenly veer off course and climb mountains. Together, they are cumbersome, blind to the dangers hiding in the Western landscape, and susceptible to an ambush. As the Rangers enter into a canyon, constricted by sharply rising cliff faces, Collins acknowledges the danger and volunteers to scout ahead. The Rangers have no choice but to trust the individual, who, acting alone, can adroitly maneuver in the imposing and restricting environment.

In *The Lone Ranger* individuality strengthens the efficacy of both heroes and villains, but villains use their individual power to pursue self-interest. Because heroes act according to civic duty, they are prone to organize into communities. The Rangers feel powerful and safe in numbers. They generate clouds of dust as they stampede towards the villains, calling to each other, "Let's go boys!" Though they execute the community

allegiance they seek to uphold, the villains understand the power and flexibility of the individual. After he volunteers as scout, Collins immediately veers off the trail, as only a single rider can, and rendezvous with his boss, Butch Cavendish, leader of the Cavendish Gang. Collins returns to the Rangers, informs them that the land is safe, and draws them into an ambush. The Rangers present a sizable target, and the gang easily defeats them. The gang is also made up of an unwieldy collection of men that must trust the individual, Collins, to ensure their effectiveness as a group, but, unlike the Rangers, they recognize their weakness. Butch orders Collins back into the canyon and then shoots Collins in the back. While the Rangers were willing to trust the individual to lead them to safety, Butch voices his distrust of the individual, especially the "half-breed" individual, who might "betray" the group by "turning on" them at any time. Butch intends for Collin's death to deter "anyone who tries to stop" him 'from now on," acknowledging the individual as a viable threat to the group. Only individuals can productively navigate this unruly, vast, sublime landscape.[13]

Kant claims that the sublime "must not be sought in things of nature, but must be sought solely in our ideas" (105). Since sublimity occurs subjectively, texts that represent characters experiencing sublimity find ways to explore interiority. Without using first-person narration, filmmakers often explore subjectivity through symbolic physical objects.[14] Trying to represent interiority in images and verbalizations *The Lone Ranger* externalizes sublime experience entirely, and in so doing, emphasizes that the subjective experience of the aesthetic is also universal. Kant argues that a subject might not feel that "everyone *will* agree with [his] judgment" but he must feel that everyone "*ought* to" agree (original emphasis 89). A subject who experiences the sublime regards the feeling

"as a common rather than as a private feeling," though aesthetic judgments are necessarily "singular" (89, 59). Jean-Francois Lyotard explains: "Universality and necessity are promised but are promised singularly every time, and are only just promised" (19).[15] By embodying the Kantian sublime, a singular hero like the Lone Ranger performs the ambivalent position of a subject who considers his experience universal. He is an individual vigilante who threatens national stability with his unlawful actions but also upholds state power for the benefit of the community. The program advocates his logical containment of the landscape by presenting the Ranger's violence as just, rational, and state-approved. It disavows and criminalizes any other individual behavior that challenges legal regulations. The Ranger's heroism must be subjective and individual while simultaneously objective and universal or he could not differentiate himself from the criminals he fights.

Both the Lone Ranger and his enemies appropriate the West for their own logical purposes. These outlaws never purposely seek disorder and chaos, but rather they wish to organize the land according to their own ambitions. *The Lone Ranger* differentiates heroes and villains by stressing the Ranger's absolute embodiment of the sublime. Kant describes the sublime as a confrontation with an object that appears to be in "ruleless disarray" (100). We recognize the limitations of our imaginations when we try to conceive the object in its totality. The chaotic realities of nature, the infinitely large or infinitely strong forces of the natural world, might, at first, appear "dominant," but through the sublime, the human mind feels that nature is "no match" against its powers of reason (119). The hero and the outlaws both confront the sublime catalyst in this text, but while the outlaws respond to the chaotic with disordered and sudden displays of violence,

the Ranger embodies the purely logical response. In the pilot episode, the outlaws forge the Lone Ranger's heroism when they ambush his troop in the canyon. In this display of lawlessness, the Lone Ranger recognizes the injustice inherent in a disordered land. The violent potential of nature, both the natural landscape and natural man, evoke the sublime for the Ranger. To depict the Ranger's subjective experience of the sublime, the camera shows us images of the Ranger moving through and negotiating the sublime stimulant.[16]

As the Ranger physically moves on, through, and against sublime nature, he embodies reason as a metaphysical freedom from the natural world. Kant's theory of subjectivity divides experience and rationality into separate epistemologies. Lyotard claims that as a result of this division "[Thinking] becomes the user of nature. This 'employment' is an abuse, a violence" (52). After he survives the Cavendish Gang's ambush, the Ranger declares his moral intention to "devote [his] life to establishing law and order in the new frontier, to make the West a decent place to live." He recognizes his heroic potency lies not in his physical strength, but in his mystique as a man with no human identity. He will not kill his enemies, but will, rather, represent the metaphysical ideas of law in a landscape that appears to defy order. By symbolizing the process of the sublime in material and visible terms, this text universalizes the Ranger's subjective experience of the sublime.[17] The only correct way to interact with nature in this narrative is through the Ranger's rational and organizing force, and though he acts on behalf of the community through an embodiment of a universal aesthetic, his heroism is subjective and individual. He punishes anyone who follows his example and acts without legal authority.

When the text externalizes the Ranger's subjective response to the sublime, his body and movements through the physical world become evidence for his powers of

reason. He violently contains the West to prove his heroic infallibility, so the text deemphasizes any of the physical, perhaps unseemly consequences of his actions. Every bullet that the Ranger shoots merely disarms his opponents, and his punches never produce a single bruise. By glossing over any of the material ramifications of violence, the text maintains the Ranger as an unambiguous hero who acts without official jurisdiction but executes a violence that the state tacitly approves.

4.5 "Renegade Indians" and "White Friend[s]": Tonto's Fate

Every element of the natural world bends to the Ranger's will, even the hero's Native American sidekick, Tonto, a character the program identifies as an intrinsic part of the Western landscape. In the pilot episode, the "native" enters the canyon just after the ambush, "as if timed by fate." "By chance" he finds the Lone Ranger lying by the stream and immediately begins to tend to the white man's wounds. The narrator's description of Tonto's behavior denies Tonto agency, claiming that he is not self-motivated, but determined by some outside force of "fate" or "chance." The designating term "native" marks Tonto, and Native Americans generally, as a part of nature and not individuals acting in, through, and across nature as the Ranger does. The landscape determines the "native," whose identity is then dependent on the land he inhabits. Unlike the white settlers from the East, who upon arriving in the West rapidly begin mapping and gridding the territory, the "native" has always existed as a component of the territory, and can never own the land that determines him.[18] As a constituent of nature, Tonto does not form a community with the Lone Ranger, but serves as part of the sublime catalyst that justifies the Ranger's controlling position.

The narrator states that Tonto is "surprised" when he sees the bodies of the Texas Rangers sprawled across the canyon's floor. "These were men to whom heroic deeds were a part of each day's work, and now their work was done," the narrator adds, slipping between third person omniscience and commentating and conflating Tonto's surprised reaction with a patriotic perspective. Tonto first speaks in a close-up shot, captured from the Lone Ranger's point of view. His face vacillates in and out of focus as the Ranger drifts between states of consciousness.[19] Though Tonto's actions seem moral and heroic in this scene, the narration and camera perspective produces a Native American character whose interiority, image, voice, and actions filter through the lens of a disembodied authority and a white American lawman. The text seamlessly welds the hegemonic perspective of the invading lawmakers to the inherently natural perspective of Native Americans, justifying the Ranger by naturalizing his authority. While subsequent episodes separate the Ranger and Tonto, the text always casts Tonto as a sidekick who cultivates Anglo-American jurisdiction in the West.

The pilot episode visually and verbally frames Tonto within the Ranger's moral and legal perspective, supporting the white man's right to look at the Native American as a natural object that he may put to use. Even when Tonto relays his own origin, the text employs Tonto's perspective to justify the Lone Ranger's controlling gaze. In a flashback, Tonto tells the story of a young Lone Ranger rescuing a young Tonto from "renegade Indians" that "raid [Tonto's] settlement" and kill his mother and sisters. The Ranger takes the position of a feminine caretaker, cradling the Indian child in his arms and "nurs[ing him] back to health." Recounting his past, Tonto invites the Ranger to share in his memory, to see Indian trauma through the eyes of an Indian. The program

establishes a sense of racial equality by switching between Tonto's and the Lone Ranger's perspectives. But this is the first and last time the program depicts Tonto's childhood. In a spirit of friendship and reciprocity, Tonto claims that the Lone Ranger's injuries are a chance for Tonto to reverse the roles of caretaking, and he proceeds to wash, feed, and watch over his "white friend." The relationship between the two men is immediately reciprocal and utopian, nostalgically circumventing the historical, social, and political realities of the American West. The program evades explicit discussions of manifest destiny and its implications and, instead, inculcates a mutually beneficial relationship between whites and Indians, suggesting that violence in the West exists inside racial communities rather than between them.

While the scene depicts the relationship between the Lone Ranger and Tonto as mutually beneficial and nurturing, the program prioritizes the problems of Anglo-American settlers, neglecting the effects of westward expansion on indigenous peoples. As a "native," a figure inextricably tied to the landscape from which he hails, Tonto works alongside the Ranger. He upholds white power by organizing settlers within the Western landscape because, as he tells the Lone Ranger, "Me want law here, too. For all."

Critics have often seen this depiction of Tonto as servile and naïve, an example of common Native American stereotypes in the genre.[20] In 1949, audiences were accustomed to depictions of Indians as either savage, violent warriors or as wise, spiritual environmentalists if they even appeared on screen at all.[21] Films like John Ford's 1948 *Fort Apache* were starting to revise these stereotypes, but the genre still largely embraced the image of the Indian as Other. As Patricia Nelson Limerick claims, "In a nation fond

of simple solutions, loyal to an image of itself as innocent and benevolent, Indian history is a troubling burden" and the texts that perpetuated stereotypical images of American Indians attempted to rationalize and dismiss this contradictory assault on American values (210). Though *The Lone Ranger* adheres to many of the Indian stereotypes in early Westerns[22] – Tonto speaks in broken English, replacing "I" with "me," and retains a symbiotic relationship with the landscape – the program also forces the audience to experience the mysterious Ranger through a Native American's perspective. Living in the Western Territories in the 19th century, Tonto must manage his proximity with white culture; he adopts the trappings of Anglo-American law in order to survive in an increasingly Anglo-dominated world. Tonto does not just stumble onto the Lone Ranger "by chance" as a result of "fate." Rather, the Lone Ranger occupies the land that Tonto has seen invaded. And Tonto does not tend to the Ranger's wounds because he is especially spiritual or naturally inclined as a caretaker, but because he imagines a relationship of debt to a man who once saved his life. By switching to Tonto's perspective, the text forces the viewer into a new narrative position and constitutes a reciprocal relationship between Native American and white man.

Tonto is the center of consciousness and the lens through which we view the hero, but he is also the "Native" Other, aligned with the sublime natural world. The sublime allows a subject to feel himself superior to nature because he envisions the limits of his sensible capabilities. Man's sense of superiority is therefore dependent on nature. The Lone Ranger, an embodiment of rational organization, depends on the landscape of the American West to uphold and elevate his heroism. Without a chaotic landscape, the Ranger is powerless to act as a hero. When Tonto personifies the landscape as a "Native"

character, he becomes the Other who justifies the Ranger's powers.[23] The Ranger devises his heroic plan and his moral code only while Tonto cares for him. Washing the Ranger's hat, crafting his mask, and tending to his wounds, Tonto disencumbers the Ranger from material reality, granting the hero the freedom to "spen[d] a lot of time thinking." As the only other character who has seen the Ranger's unmasked face, Tonto perpetuates and fashions the mythic potency of the Ranger. Though they both perform heroic acts, they do not form a community. Rather, Tonto serves as a personification of the sublime object, justifying the hero's organization of the Western landscape by expressing complacent fidelity.

4.6 Sublime Violence

By embodying the sublime, the Ranger materializes a subject's reaction to an alarmingly large or powerful natural object. He performs the subject's sense of rational superiority to the sublime catalyst, becoming a purely rational, individual hero who transforms the material American West into a universal aesthetic and a symbol. By insisting that his physical actions are merely demonstrations of his rational power, the Ranger disguises his violence as nonviolence. When he was a part of a community of Texas Rangers, the Lone Ranger acted under the legal protection of government-sanctioned violent authority. Now, acting alone, the Ranger claims that he will only shoot to "defend" himself, but never to kill: "If a man must die it's up to the law to decide that. Not the person behind a six-shooter." In every episode, the Ranger executes what looks very much like violence. He regularly shoots at outlaws and criminals who disrupt community harmony, but the program bypasses realistic representations of the

consequences. Though he regularly engages in violent combat, the Ranger uses his supernatural marksmanship to avoid seriously injuring or killing the "bad guy[s]" that threaten the process of settlement. While the opening sequence suggests that humans retain an inherent violence that disrupts and harms, the Ranger shows how rational violence can organize and defend. Violence is, as René Girard claims, both "good" and "bad," "pure" and "impure," constructive and destructive (51, 115). Uncontrolled, instinctive violence threatens to destroy Western communities. The Ranger upholds communal power structures by acting purposively and individually, disregarding the physical results of violence by embodying rationality.[24]

The Lone Ranger finds an occasion to execute this symbolic, beneficial violence in the pilot episode when the double-crosser, Collins, shoots at the hero. Tonto and the Lone Ranger hear the gunshot and take cover. Tonto asks why Collins is shooting and the Ranger answers that the outlaw wants to steal Tonto's horse. Asking questions and demanding explanations, Tonto reinforces the Lone Ranger's position as a law-enforcing mythical agent. The curious, supportive sidekick allows the Ranger to vocally express his ideas, clearly articulating his mythic potential.

When Tonto performs as a "native" sidekick, he reinforces the Ranger's relationship to the environment and propagates the Ranger's colonizing gestures. Through the series of questions and answers, the dialogue between hero and sidekick illustrates the Ranger's logical function. Though he has undergone trauma, witnessing the murder of his entire troop including his brother and sustaining his own life-threatening injury, he does not express any anger or desire for retribution. The Ranger returns fire not because he wants to kill Collins, not for the sake of vengeance, and for his own safety,

but because capturing Collins supports his mission of bringing law and order to the West.

After thoroughly explaining his motivations, the Ranger finally shoots at Collins, not aiming to kill but to "capture him alive." The Ranger and Tonto strategically scale a cliff-face, Tonto deftly climbing above Collins while the Ranger remains below. The Ranger executes superb marksmanship – shooting the gun out of Collins's hands from an impossible angle – but he is unable to keep Collins from death. Cornered, and precariously hanging over the cliff-face, Collins slips and falls, bouncing off the jagged rocks multiple times before hitting the ground hundreds of feet below. While the Ranger's bullets leave no physical mark, wrenching the gun out of Collins' hands without wounding him, nature's effects are far more grisly. The villain dies not by the hands of man, but because he is unable to effectively navigate sublime nature. Attempting to force nature to bend to his will, to shelter him and provide him a vantage point, Collins underestimates nature's power and falls to his death. For a moment the Ranger also hangs from the cliff-face, but unlike the villain, the hero recovers and climbs to safety. His heroism, both his efficacy and moral authority, depends on his ability to utilize nature. While the villain stumbles and trips to his ultimate death, nature bends to the Ranger's will, upholding and even facilitating his violence.

Though the Ranger claimed that he did not want to kill Collins, he acknowledges – prompted by Tonto – that a "strange act of providence" led to Collins's death. Were Collins to survive and return to town, he might reveal the Ranger's identity, destroying the hero's mythic potential as a disembodied idea. "Providence," comparable to the "fate" and "chance" that led Tonto to the Ranger, is an instrument of nature, and nature is now under the dominion of the Ranger. When nature does not seem to "fate[fully]" support his

heroic actions, the Ranger confronts it and forces it to bend to his will. Outlaws may achieve some success in the West because of nature's potential disorder, but the Lone Ranger is ultimately successful as a hero because he can navigate and map that space, containing and confining settlers through the sublime process of rationalization. Every space the Ranger and Silver rides through becomes territory, ruled by law and claimed by the United States.[25]

Because the Western territories occupied an intermediate position between colonies and states, the United States government granted them limited rights to representation, but expected the settlers to adhere to national laws (Limerick 79-80). Excluding the territories from its representational system of government, the U.S. demonstrated its control over anything external from itself. In what Giorgio Agamben calls an "inclusive exclusion," the government proves that it has the ability to determine whom it can legally punish, even to the point of death (8). Exercising power over all people who reside in this liminal government space, the United States governs mortality, appropriating all people into political subjects whose existence legitimizes the power of the nation-state (9).

The Lone Ranger, riding through the landscape and shooting at those who disobey state law, establishes the state's sphere of influence when he controls and organizes nature. He conquers the chaos of the sublime by embodying and performing his own rational power, putting nature to use as both an individual and also a universal hero. Just as the state demonstrates its power over citizens both inside and outside its sphere of control, determining who may live and who must die, the Ranger harnesses nature's power and claims it as a mechanism of his heroism. What was once providential, fateful,

and erratic now invariably benefits the hero, and since the Ranger is also a government-appointed agent, nature falls under the jurisdiction of the United States government. Because the sublime is a subjective and universal aesthetic, the Ranger's state-sponsored embodiment establishes government as unconditionally powerful and moral.[26] Just as the state designates some people as what Agamben calls "bare life," the Ranger also eliminates criminals without political consequences. The criminal is merely natural and, thus, nonrational, and his elimination makes room for the more civilized, state-sponsored life of a settler. Therefore, the Ranger may never intend to kill his enemies, but their consistent demise is always fortuitous and never lamentable. And though his vigilantism is technically illegal, the state increases its power by designating him an exception to the rules; he acts according to his duty as an individual subject by expanding state power wherever he rides.

4.7 Sublime Civilization: The Domestication of Silver

In every episode the Ranger performs some acts of violence, but ultimately he wants to replace the violent realities of the West with the possibility of communion between wilderness and civilization. The second episode, "The Lone Ranger Fights On" (aired September 22, 1949), features a jarring confrontation between domestic and wild that the Ranger then reconciles. After traveling through the landscape on foot for two days, the Ranger arrives at his destination: "A remote valley of wild horses, where a particularly sturdy breed of horses lives unknown and unmolested by the hunters of the West." At the entrance to the valley, the Ranger interrupts a battle between a buffalo and a wild stallion. Determining the horse's life to be of greater value, the Ranger shoots and

kills the buffalo. He nurses the horse, which he names Silver, back to health, earning the wild stallion's trust, and securing the horse's permanent allegiance. Just as he navigates desert paths, climbs steep mountain cliffs, and befriends a Native American sidekick, the Ranger determines his hierarchical relationship to the natural world through the wild stallion. Killing the buffalo, a long-established symbol of the wild, untamed, American West, the Ranger demonstrates his investment in the civilizing process, taming what was once wild and destroying or overriding those aspects of nature that refuse to submit.[27]

The first three-episode arc of *The Lone Ranger* spends a considerable amount of time on the domestication of Silver, showing the Ranger earning the horse's trust. Just as a warring Indian tribe injured young Tonto, and Western outlaws injured the Lone Ranger, the chaotic, unforgiving natural world has injured the stallion. Tonto and the Ranger set up camp next to the fallen horse, tending to his wounds in the way they have nursed each other. In this economy of nurturing, the horse thrives, and quickly responds to the Ranger's directions. The narrator describes the Ranger "Gentl[y]" and "expert[ly]" guiding the horse through equestrian practices until "horse and rider" form a "partnership" in which both parties "accept each other as equal" and literally override previous conflicts. But just as the Ranger and Tonto's partnership immediately turned hierarchical, the Ranger demonstrates his sublime management of the natural world through this domestication process. Rising for the first time, the horse gallops away from the humans until the Ranger calls him by name. Though the horse has never interacted with humans before, does not understand verbal commands, and certainly has no allegiance to his new name, Silver obediently turns back to the hero and allows the Ranger to place a hackamore around his head. So although the narrator claims, "Here is

no conflict between animal and master," the Ranger's embodiment of a dominating sublime force invalidates the concept of an "equal" "partnership" between man and the natural world. The designation of Western life as bare life transforms Silver from wild stallion into domestic "partner." Bridling the horse, the Ranger states, "We're going to be pals, aren't we Silver," as though a confined, domesticated horse may choose its friends. The program depicts neutral, apolitical nature cooperating with the state to uphold power structures, even though the Ranger sits on Silver's back and determines the horse's every move.

Though the program insists that the relationship between man and horse is fortuitous and mutually beneficial, the Ranger seems to contradict his thoughts on equality and friendship when he comments on ownership. He claims that the wild stallion is free and, therefore, must choose its own subjugation: "I want that horse more than anything in the world, but if he wants to go, he should be free." Jane Tompkins argues that the final domestication of Silver "reveals the [Ranger's] assumption that when a horse is owned by a man, the horse gives up his freedom . . . when a man is literally in the saddle and the other animal is underneath bearing the weight, that is not a relationship among equals" (99). The Ranger believes that domestication revokes a certain amount of freedom, and yet he also calls Silver an equal partner and a "pal." His relationship with the wild stallion resembles his relationship to Western settlers. As a representative of the state, he corrals and restricts unruly citizens, but as an individual hero, he models the power of one man to organize his environment. Declaring its people equal, endowing them with legal rights, the state demonstrates its power over the inalienable, and constructs freedom within the context of restrictive power. Just as Silver is both property

and friend, and Tonto is both sidekick and caregiver, the Western settler is both beholden and free. As a sublime embodiment, the Ranger transforms nature into an aesthetic that serves his civilizing purposes. Through the process of domestication, Silver becomes a metaphor: just as the Ranger sits on the horse's back and dominates the wild, he shoots at individuals and forces them to obey the law.[28]

4.8 Conclusion

The Ranger's precarious position between vigilante and lawmaker constitutes his efficacy as a hero. In the third episode of the program – the conclusion of the origin story arc –the sheriff stands on the porch of the jailhouse, looking over the streets and lamenting to his deputies, "Ah, those dirty killers! I wish I knew where to look for them!" He speculates on where in the vast, natural world the Cavendish gang could be hiding, and his legal strategy is punctuated by his insistence that he "never suspected" this criminal behavior. Tonto approaches the group of white men and declares that he knows the location of the Cavendish gang. Glancing down at the Native American from his elevated position, the Sheriff address Tonto, "Go away, Indian. Can't you see I'm busy?" then continues his fruitless and erroneous conjecture. Tonto repeats himself twice, and when the sheriff finally listens, he replies, "If you know where he is, why didn't you say so?" The scene demonstrates the white man's inability to commune properly with the West, as symbolized through the Native American. The Sheriff cannot find the Cavendish gang because his jurisdiction is merely legal. As a government-appointed authority without any understanding of the natural world, he cannot organize or navigate the West.

Conversely, the Lone Ranger quickly locates the criminals by reading wagon

tracks imprinted into the dirt road. Riding the domesticated Silver, the Ranger enlists the support of a miner, a sheriff, a doctor, and an Indian (Tonto) and approaches the outlaw gang. These character types of the West assist the Ranger by corralling the outlaws, but, ultimately, the Ranger must break from the community, proving his superiority as an individual over the Cavendish gang's "organization." The gang has corrupted the vulnerable settlement of Colby, infiltrating every level of its infrastructure. As a physical force, the Lone Ranger is outnumbered and no match for the outlaws, but the Lone Ranger has a logical "plan" that will overpower mere physicality. As an individual, the Ranger can use the rocks and crevices of the landscape to "surprise" the gang. Hooting like an owl, Tonto distracts the leader of the gang so the Lone Ranger can attack, proving again that those individuals with knowledge of the Western landscape can ultimately master any of its challenges. Though the Ranger involves the community in his heroic actions, it is clear that the community does not offer him much help. Instead, the community serves as a witness to his power as an individual. The doctor and sheriff watch the hero with their hands literally tied behind their backs as the Ranger defeats a member of the Cavendish gang. Even at the end of the episode, when the men of Colby and the outlaw gang finally confront each other in a violent battle, the Ranger demonstrates his individual power by separating from the group, chasing after the leader of the Cavendish gang, and then leading him "back to the fight."

Through his sublime embodiment the Ranger teaches the community about the individual's responsibility in the American West to uphold state power. Alone, the Ranger forces chaos into law and order, materializing universal ethics through his rational power. The Ranger involves the community in his schemes, but he never needs

them to facilitate the action. In fact, their vulnerability in numbers often becomes a hindrance. Watching him, the community witnesses a visual representation of the Kantian sublime. As the community begins to rely on the Ranger's process of settlement, they begin to accept his brand of state-sponsored power as unquestionably rational and moral. Through the sublime, *The Lone Ranger* effectively conflates individual values with state-sponsored American values, representing the quintessential American hero as one who disobeys law only to maintain order. While settlement requires numbers, a community that can work together to tame the land, heroism requires a break from the community. The sheriff acknowledges the potency of the individual American hero at the end of the origin story when the Ranger says, "You and your men are to be congratulated, Sheriff," and the sheriff responds, "Thanks, but if it hadn't been for you we'd have gotten nowhere." The Sheriff leads the Cavendish leader out of frame, saying that this time he will punish the criminal "personally."

4.9 Notes

[1] In *Myths America Lives By* Richard Hughes calls this "The Myth of Nature's Nation": "Because the American founders grounded the American experiment in their vision of 'Nature and Nature's God,' it was easy to imagine that the United States simply reflected the way God himself intended things to be from the beginning of the world. In other words, the American system was not spun out of someone's imagination or contrived by human wit. Instead, it was based on a natural order, built into the world by God himself" (56).

[2] Inventing the term "Manifest Destiny" in 1845, John O'Sullivan suggested that support for the acquisition of Texas is a "patriotic duty," "inevitable and irrevocable." He argues that opposing national expansion "thwart[s] our policy and hamper[s] our power, limit[s] our greatness and check[s] the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (6).

[3] The most recent version of the character appeared in Disney's 2013 release *The Lone Ranger*. Critics from *The San Francisco Examiner*, *Salon*, and *The AV Club* gave the film favorable reviews, with Andrew O'Hehir claiming the film is a "mordant and ambitious work of pop-political craftsmanship" that "never lets you forget that the Manifest Destiny that drove Anglo-American society across our continent was a thin veneer pasted across a series of genocidal crimes." But the film review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes* reports that the overall critical response was negative (they awarded the film a "rotten" rating), and in a different article on *Salon*, O'Hehir claims the film was a "box-office dud" and an "extreme[ly] stupid" idea.

[4] In *American Technological Sublime*, David E. Nye explains the apparent contradiction by claiming that the American conception of the sublime was "a peculiar double action of the imagination by which the land was appropriated as a natural symbol of the nation while, at the same time, it was being transformed into a man-made landscape" (37).

[5] Ned O'Gorman argues that this process of aestheticization "relegate[s]" the "corporeal world" to "an inferior level" by privileging "spirit over matter" and designating American identity as "ultimately spirit" (60). "The American sublime . . . eviscerates the rhetorical conditions that bring . . . determinate forms into the sphere of recognition and accountability" and allows citizens to ignore "injustices, disparities, inconsistencies, and crimes of the nation" (68).

[6] According to Sacvan Bercovitch, American citizens could turn corporeal reality into symbols and concepts by considering physical and historical circumstances as aesthetic experiences, "as though the ideal promulgated by a certain group or class (. . . individualism, mobility, self-reliance, free enterprise) were not the product of history but the expression of self-evident truth" (636).

[7] In a 2008 interview on NPR, American studies scholar Gary Hoppenstand suggests that

the "failure of capitalism" in America in 1933 demonstrated the government's inability to "protect the American people from . . . what was, up to that point, one of the worst financial experiences of American history." Americans enjoyed *The Lone Ranger*, in part, because he represented their interests from a position "outside the bounds of government" ("The Man Behind").

[8] In *Gunfighter Nation* Richard Slotkin describes the way Western heroes negotiate the conflicting goals of the two positions, arguing that these kinds of "militarized frontier hero[es]" have "severe limitations" because the "mass-culture audience" was often unwilling to accept a hero who bypassed "notions of democracy, equality, government by consent, and America as the refuge of the oppressed" completely (91, 95).

[9] Michael Ray Fitzgerald uses this opening sequence as evidence of the Ranger's relationship with divinity. His association with the mountains implies "strength and stability" while his position against the sky claims a "special relationship" from the place "from whence he came" (82). While Fitzgerald associates the landscape with Christian "Messianic tropes," I believe the Ranger serves a more secular purpose, exemplifying a prevailing attitude of the individual's relationship to the sublime environment.

[10] O'Gorman cites these "gigantic and often transcendental figures and frontiers" as "sublime totems or vistas – which have the effect of displacement as they overcome a common order of national being and replace it with an extraordinary and unspeakable one" (49).

[11] Mark Ellis, Matthew Baugh, and Win Eckert attempt to provide a definitive chronology for the Lone Ranger that identifies his birthday as September 14, 1850. But this information comes from a much later source, the 1981 film *The Legend of the Lone Ranger*, that attempts to correct historical errors by updating the origin to corroborate the hero's new, politically liberal, mythical function. The authors of the timeline recognize the difficulties of piecing together a cohesive narrative from various, conflicting, source materials and see the chronology as a "work in progress."

[12] Chadwick Allen explains the role of the "half-breed" in *The Lone Ranger* and other Western genre texts: ". . . he is represented in the popular White imagination as ultimately dangerous to all, not only to encroaching settlers or to insurgent Indians but to White outlaws as well, for in the long run the half-breed upsets all hierarchies, all systems of power – including the Indian-White treaty" (625).

[13] Kant claims that the sublime occurs "within ourselves," and allows us to feel "entirely independent of nature" so that we may put "our intuitions of nature" to "use" (100). "When, in an aesthetic judgment we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us, then it is *dynamically sublime* [original emphasis]" (119).

[14] Brian McFarlane claims that the desire to adapt texts to film is "an urge to have verbal concepts bodied forth in perceptual concreteness" (8). As the camera acts as the narrator, subtly commenting and making judgments on the images, it is also positioned securely outside any character's subjectivity. This creates a filmic narrator that always possesses

"restricted consciousness" that may employ a center of consciousness but always maintains some level of omniscience (18).

[15] Lyotard calls this subjective universality a "reflective tautology" (18).

[16] Kant describes our desire to understand these catalyzing objects. The sublime aesthetic reaffirms the powers of reason, because "to be able even to think the infinite as a whole indicates a mental power that surpasses any standard of sense" (111). According to Kant the sublime "frees" the mind from the physical world by "expanding" the powers of reason beyond sensible experience (135).

[17] In trying to make the sublime visible, this text attempts to contradict what Jean-Francois Lyotard claims is an essential characteristic of the sublime: its resistance to representation. The sublime cannot be represented because it is "unlimited," "Nor can it be limited, for then one must presuppose an empty space beyond the extension of the finite world . . and no sensible intuition can provide objects that correspond to this supposition" (59).

[18] In *Notes on the State of Virginia* Thomas Jefferson argues that Native Americans develop certain characteristics as a result of the land they occupy: the differences between Native American culture and European culture "are to be found, not in a difference of nature, but of circumstance" (65). Jefferson argues that enslaving Native Americans is thus "an inhuman practice" because the race is so intrinsically connected to the American landscape (this in contrast to African slaves whose "difference is fixed in nature") (65, 145).

[19] Michael Ray Fitzgerald identifies this filmic technique as a deliberate "soft focus" that feminizes Tonto (93). I believe the focus is a depiction of the Ranger's distorted point of view, one that might, indeed, be feminizing, but is also, importantly, conveyed as interior perception.

[20] Jane Tompkins calls Tonto the Lone Ranger's "servant" (99). Allen says Tonto is in "faithful service to the White hero" (629). And Fitzgerald claims that Tonto is a feminized, "ethnic sidekick" under control of the Ranger's white male gaze (79, 83). In his article on race in early comics, Bruce Lenthall claims Tonto's broken speech "reveal[s his] status" as a racial other in "voluntary servitude" (44-5).

[21] Popular, critically acclaimed Westerns like *The Great Train Robbery, My Darling Clementine*, and *The Virginian* largely ignore the place of Native Americans in the West, choosing, instead, to focus on the process of civilization among white citizens. Other films, like *Stagecoach,* feature Indians as plot devices, meant to challenge white settlers in climactic battle scenes.

[22] As Fitzgerald cites in his article, although the program was seen as "politically correct" at the time of its first airing, alternative readings of and jokes about the Tonto character soon dominated popular culture throughout the 50s and 60s (101-2).

[23] Tonto's self-aware position as a prop for white civilization continues throughout the program. Later in this episode, Tonto tries to convince the sheriff of Colby to follow him into the wilderness, but the sheriff refuses on racist grounds. Appealing to the sheriff's ego Tonto flatters him: "You brave law man. Want to solve mystery." And claims that the ride will be "Not far for tough sheriff."

[24] As an individual who has died and been reborn as a mythic force, the Ranger can restore and order the community by turning unordered, chaotic "reciprocal violence" into controllable and "beneficial" "restraining violence" (Girard 96).

[25] Jane Tompkins in *West of Everything* argues that the domestication of the wild stallion is a Western trope that "says every man can be a master. Every man can dominate something, be it the landscape, other human beings, an animal, or his own body. Each time the figure of a horseman appears against the horizon, it celebrates the possibility of mastery, of self, of others, of the land, or circumstance" (101). But although we agree that the horse represents the possibility of mastery over nature, Tompkins believes the Western genre's fascination with horses is a sign of a contemporary longing for a past life that was "antimodern, antiurban, and antitechnological" (93). In the domestication of Silver, I see a longing for domestication, a desire to mold the wild stallion into a bit of nature that can be put to use according to sublime logic. This seems a move towards modernization, a kind of technology that can, finally, create urban spaces.

[26] Independent of sensible experience and based on universal reason, moral law, according to Kant, is a law that does not serve personal inclinations or happiness, but is "bare law for its own sake" (*Groundwork* 72). Morality is "an objective principle (that is one which would also serve subjectively as a practical principle for all rational beings if reason had full control over the faculty of desire)" (73).

[27] Tonto compares Silver to a "mountain covered in snow," even furthering the metaphor of the horse as wild nature just waiting to be tamed by a civilizing force.

[28] Another symbol of the Lone Ranger's civic leadership is the silver bullet: "Silver bullets will serve as sort of a symbol. . . A symbol which means justice by law. I want it to become known to all who see the silver bullet that I live and fight only to see the eventual defeat and the proper punishment by law of every criminal in the West." It is an especially apt symbol of the Ranger's intent because silver is a natural element that settlers can gather, mold, and put to use.

CHAPTER 5

"NATION'S NO. 1 SPY BUSTER!": CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

5.1 Introducing the Patriotic Hero

The second issue of *Captain America Comics* (published April 1941) begins with a story called "Captain America and the Ageless Orientals Who Wouldn't Die!" Reminiscent of Batman's fight against Dr. Strange and the mutated mental patients (which appeared one year earlier in *Batman #1*), Captain America battles a group of green-tinted, bald, murderous giants. Working under the command of an evil banker, these "Oriental Giants" attack and kill every American they encounter. Captain America perceives the chaos – "Sounds like a war going on!" – and jumps into the fight. He punches, kicks, throws, and struggles to slay the fanged monsters, but they appear to be immortal. Finally, Cap's young sidekick, Bucky, throws a grenade and a giant immediately dies, vulnerable to the loud noise. At the climax of the story, Cap rounds all of the giants into a room. Bucky lights a cannon, and "The deafening explosion shatters the lifeline of the giants, and in horrible agony they crumple in death!" A policeman and a fireman enter the room. The policeman exclaims, "Holy mackerel! Look at all those dead giants!" And the fireman responds, "Whoever did this certainly did the country a

big favor!" Meanwhile, Captain America, disguised as his alter-ego Steve Rogers, returns to his army camp and resumes his perpetual potato peeling.

In this militarized fight against a racialized enemy, Captain America distinguishes himself from his superhero contemporaries. When Batman attacks his giant, mutant enemies in his Batplane, the comic carefully manipulates his image, stressing his rational justifications for vigilante violence. The *Batman* comic stresses that although the hero's actions are necessary, they are also unpleasant, ambiguous, and obscured in a nighttime setting. In contrast, Captain America operates in the daytime, covered in a brightly patriotic suit, flipping and twisting through the air in apparent glee. Captain America compares his fight to "a war going on" and immediately attempts to kill the monsters, joking that they are his "little friends" and calling one an "overgrown ignoramus." But though the comic depicts a joyful Captain America, playing with the monsters as though the battle were a game, it also maintains the hero's clear, selfless motivations. He does "the country a big favor" when he kills the villains, and when the evil banker accidentally dies in the process, the policeman claims he "Save[s] th' government an electric bill!"

In the Batman story, Dr. Strange clearly articulates his motivations: he will use his mutants to distract law enforcement so he can rob banks. Batman must oppose the hyperintelligent supervillain through his own sublime logic, justifying his violent heroism by insisting that he is rationally superior. This issue of *Captain America Comics* presents a dynamic between hero and villain forged in primitive emotions and unambiguous patriotism. The evil banker is illogical and impetuous, without a clear plan to secure any viable gain, and Captain America acts purely and explicitly for love of country. As a private peeling potatoes in the army, Steve Rogers exemplifies the unquestioned

obedience of an ideal citizen, and as a superhero captain, Captain America demonstrates heroic, proactive patriotism. While the *Batman* story explores the human origins of the giants, the *Captain America* story marks the giants as distinctly other – from a foreign country, with monstrous racial traits and inferior mental capacities. Captain America's confrontation with the giants is not only a fight against supernatural monsters, but is also a fight against an enemy to the nation-state; his battle signifies his unwavering allegiance to his country.

Assisting in this fight is a teenage sidekick, Bucky, who resolves two of the major conflicts in the issue. It is Bucky who throws a grenade and discovers that he can kill the giants with loud noises, and it is Bucky who frees Captain America from the evil banker's shackles. Though Bucky does not possess any of the superpowers of Captain America, he still performs with "lighting-like movement" and serves as an essential component of the superhero's efficacy. Just as a Captain in a war might direct his troops, Captain America relies on Bucky's assistance, and would be incapable of heroics without the support of his sidekick, whom another soldier calls "a mere kid."

Captain America is the ideal America citizen at the heart of the comic, demonstrating leadership, patriotism, community investment and individual heroism. Through his example, Cap urges readers to oppose the foreign enemies who threaten to infiltrate the country. He is unabashedly patriotic, but in order to act heroically, Cap disrupts the status quo, disobeying direct orders and abandoning his unit. His heroic violence is a constant renegotiation between state embodiment and individual rebellion. The story is concerned with the dangers of political conformity: the giants blindly follow the evil banker's orders, "as though walking in a dream," and the comic never explains

their motivations for doing so. Working together as a massive group, they act "with the orders of a madman ringing in their ears." And though the issue associates irrational allegiance with a distinctly foreign enemy, it also reveals potential defects in the U.S. Army when, at the end of the issue, a general criticizes Steve Rogers. "Can't tell about them privates, ma'm," he tells FBI agent and love-interest, Betty Ross, "they think they own the army!" Disgusted by Rogers' sense of autonomy and self-ownership, the general unwittingly wishes the private would emulate the giants: if only American soldiers would follow the dictates of their generals as strictly as the giants obeyed the evil banker. Though the issue situates the general's criticism in ironic contrast to Captain America's individual heroism, it anticipates Cap's later crises of faith and his resistance to rigid chains of command. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created their version of the superhero in 1941 as an embodiment of a country on the verge of war, urging their readers to personally invest in what they believed was an ethical conflict.[1] By writing and illustrating early issues that both celebrate and critique state power, Simon and Kirby created a character who has persisted through periods of conflict and peace. Never straying far from the first origin story, the comics present a hero who is iconoclast and nationalist, patriot and anarchist, Republican, Democrat, and Libertarian.

5.2 Ambivalent Power

Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s the comic book industry flourished. Superhero comics were especially profitable, with *Action Comics* alone selling around a million issues each month (Jones 158). Soon, countless copycat superheroes emerged on the market, attempting to recreate the tropes that made Superman and Batman so

successful. Characters such as the Sub-Mariner, the Human Torch, Blue Beetle, and the Sandman all appeared in 1939 in the immediate aftermath of *Action Comics #1*. While Superman's infinite power and Batman's moral ambiguity prevented both of these superheroes from interfering in American foreign policy, comic book publishers anticipated the popular desire for militarized heroes. Standing on the verge of a world war, Americans were interested in how superhero characters might respond to foreign threats.[2] As one reader wrote in a 1939 letter to *Time* magazine, it would be "ridiculously simple" for Superman to enter the war and "clean up Hitler!" ("Superman" 62). The comics industry responded to the national temperament with other, less powerful and more overtly nationalistic superheroes. Characters such as Shield, Minute-Man, and Captain Battle all appeared in 1940-1941. These patriotic heroes wore red, white, and blue costumes and fought to preserve the notion of inherent and unique American values.

Among these militaristic heroes, Captain America was and remains the most popular and prolific. The publisher of Timely Comics (later renamed Marvel Comics), Martin Goodman, had a history of using his magazines to address the rise of the Nazi party and its danger to the American populace. Aiming to educate children about complicated global politics, he used superhero figures such as Sub-Mariner and the Human Torch to battle Nazi propaganda beginning in 1938 (Stevens 25-6). Goodman hired Joe Simon and Jack Kirby to create an overtly militaristic superhero when he noticed the success of MLJ Comics' patriotic hero, Shield.[3] Previous heroes would initially appear in anthologies, testing their popularity with readers before moving to their own publications, but Captain America first appeared in his own, self-titled comic in December 1940.[4] *Captain America Comics* encouraged the individual American citizen

to support the war effort at home and abroad before the United States was officially involved.[5] One full year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Captain America fought against Nazi and Japanese threats on a domestic front, stressing the danger of a fifth column that might infiltrate U.S. borders.[6]

While many early superhero texts celebrate vigilantes - outlaws, rebels, and outright criminals – *Captain America Comics* presents a hero who cooperates with governmental power structures. His origin story depicts the executive branch, the FBI, government-funded scientists, and the military collaborating to construct a superpowerful, mythic soldier who can fight foreign enemies and inspire the American populace. Captain America embodied and actively promoted sovereign authority by responding to contemporary political realities. Unlike other superhero narratives that set their stories in fictional, and perhaps allegorical, settings, Captain America enacts his heroism in real places, interacting with famous and influential personalities. In the real world, Roosevelt delivers speeches and chats urging citizens to prepare for another global conflict; in the pages of *Captain America*, Roosevelt approves a secret plan to build American super soldiers. In the early 1940s, when popular rhetoric labeled the war as ethical and even evidence of divine providence, Captain America's heroism aligned with the political status quo.[7]

Many critics have considered early *Captain America Comics* jingoistic national propaganda. Jason Dittmer believes Captain America embodies a nationalist identity with which readers are meant to identify (25, 12). Mark White agrees that Cap is meant as a "role model" without "character flaws" (x, 17). And John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett label the character as an "iconic shorthand" who "carr[ies] the zealous mainstream

of political sentiment" (*Captain America* 6). These critics believe that as the world changes, Captain America remains constant, and, as Dittmer argues, perpetually defends the notion that a moral, objective, and powerful U.S. government should police a "liberal, internationalist hegemony" (133). J. Richard Stevens argues that, over time, Captain America adapts to more ambiguous political climates. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, he becomes an iconoclastic icon, a "liberal crusader" who questions his patriotism and denounces racist and nationalistic government policies. But, Stevens believes that these later iterations sharply depart from early representations: "Captain America does not spend much time questioning the role his patriotism has in shaping his worldview. The inner turmoil concerning his role as icon and agent of US policy that would characterize later incarnations of the character is simply not present in the 1940s version" (55).

While these critics are interested in Captain America's origin story and its evolution over time, they tend to emphasize the origin's narrative qualities rather than its formal particulars. Minimizing the possibility of form to upset narrative and generic expectations, critics conclude that the origin initiates the early comics' indiscriminate patriotism. But Captain America's first appearance as a "frail young man" who unknowingly submits to government-sponsored human experimentation produces a hero who embodies a troubling paradox.[8] Style, color, shadow, and framing all contribute to the origin's unsavory and suspicious atmosphere, casting ambiguity onto the hero and the government he symbolizes. Though government spawns a superhero who upholds the righteous power of the nation-state, it also infiltrates the individual's consciousness, altering his mind and body in unknowable ways. Ultimately, the series is a celebration of

American values, but it is never a celebration of unjustified power.

Beginning with the first issue of *Captain America Comics*, Captain America represents the ironic and ideal position of each American citizen who must uphold sovereign power through subversive individualism. As a symbol Captain America represents absolute moral and legal authority, but his actual conduct is often morally dubious and illegal. From the first issue of *Captain America Comics*, Cap has been both an extension of government authority and an autonomous individual; he is leader and citizen, captain and private, individual and collective, guilty and innocent, ideal and material. And though various iterations of Captain America have explored his paradoxical position to different degrees throughout the character's history, the origin immediately establishes the tension between Cap's individual freedom and his allegiance to the nation.

Captain America confirms both state and individual power, modeling the American citizen's status in the face of sovereign authority. While other superheroes negotiate their individual ethics against, around, and parallel to official government structures, Captain America receives his ethical code and responsibility directly from the government. Injecting a super serum into Cap's blood stream, government scientists force him to confront the technological sublime within his body and mind. When Superman, Batman, and the Lone Ranger evoke and embody the sublime, they assimilate their violence into traditional heroic categories. Their sublime authority forges characters who are autonomous and powerful individuals. They may adapt and change through time, but their moral maxims and heroic motivations remain consistent. Captain America embodies American ideals and power structures to justify his violence. The initial motivations for

and outcomes of his heroism align so closely with official government policy that he does not need to provide the logical reasons for his heroism. Instead, the technological sublime within Captain America's own body forges a character without borders, inextricably affiliated with the government that created him. The technological sublime dissolves the borders between inside and outside, nature and subject, citizen and nation, producing a character who is simultaneously subversive and subservient – in other words, an accurate model of an individual living under sovereign power.

5.3 The Technological Sublime

As evidence of the state's sublime power over nature and technology, Captain America both embodies state power and also exemplifies the ideal citizen's relationship to the sublime and the nation. After a government scientist injects him with a super serum, Captain America feels state power literally coursing through his veins. So though his vigilante heroism often breaks official legal restrictions, he always upholds sovereign power. When the government manufactures Cap's mind and body, names him Captain America, and declares his symbolic purpose, it crafts a superhero who embodies the state, transforming disobedience into omnipotence.

Kant describes how sublime judgments generate a feeling of moral empowerment. Sensing a natural object that is too large or strong to fully comprehend, we attempt to understand the object as a complete concept and reach the limits of our imaginative capabilities. As Howard Horwitz writes, "For Kant, feeling the unattainability of objects or ideas *in themselves* marks the brute fact of human finiteness" (32, original emphasis). But though our imaginations are inextricable from the sensible world, our rational

capabilities are supersensible. Reason intervenes in the process of understanding and the sublime leads us to "recognize our physical impotence," but also our "independence of" and "superiority over nature" (Kant 120-1). Nature evokes the sublime when "it calls forth our strength" and allows us to consider the demands of the physical world – our "natural concerns" such as "property, health, and life" – "as small" (121). The sublime aesthetic facilitates our ability to "uphold" our "highest principles" because "the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature" (121). By moving the sublime catalyst from outside the self to inside the self, Kant extends the sublime experience indefinitely, suggesting that the sublime may reproduce itself when we feel our "own sublimity." Transcending the dictates of the natural world, the subject regards himself as free, and thus capable of making moral choices.

Kant argues that the natural world provokes the sublime,[9] but Captain America upholds state power by embodying America's technological prowess. Transforming into a technological wonder, Captain America demonstrates state-sponsored power over both nature, and the process of mastering nature. David Nye describes how the technological sublime became an integral part of public life in the United States. Reinvesting an increasingly secularized world with "transcendent significance," the technological sublime helps "bind together a multicultural society" by "imbu[ing] technology with moral values" and becoming an "outward and visible sign of an ideal America" (xiv-xx).[10] Man-made structures such as the railroad, bridges, skyscrapers, factories, and electricity inspire a communal sublime experience that all Americans can share. Kant describes the sublime as a "movement" in our minds that ultimately causes the mind to

"fee[l] elevated in its own judgment of itself" (113-4). The technological sublime is a double movement: man proves his superiority over the sensible world when he manufactures incredible technology, and then feels the sublime again when he contemplates and understands the technological object.[11] Through the use of technology, man proves his capacity to use nature according to his will, and when that technology is infinitely complicated and awe-inspiring, it may, itself, produce the sublime. Therefore, observing a certain piece of technology, a subject might feel the sublime in nature, in the human mastery of nature, and in her own understanding of that mastery. By utilizing that technology, the subject might extend the sublime moment indefinitely.[12]

Since, as Kant claims, the sublime "obligat[es]" the subject to "develop and exercise" his supersensible superiority (121), Americans have used the sublime as a rhetorical tool to promote self-serving policies and practices. Beginning with Jefferson's description of the new land as "wild and tremendous" (21), America, as a body politic, saw itself as the sublime object and the rational subject, both a part of the natural world and independent of nature. Emerson articulates the subject's paradoxical independence of and reliance on nature when he claims, "Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all . . ." He describes the sublime in his address to Divinity College in 1838: "The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself" (115). Although he describes the sublime as a communion with nature rather than strictly transcendence, Emerson maintains that man must adhere to his individual will to access the divine. Like Kant, Emerson locates a perpetual sublime in the subject's interiority. Thoreau echoes Emerson's desire for an interior sense of mastery

when he writes in his journal in 1851, "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear" (204), a sentiment Roosevelt famously echoed in his 1932 First Inaugural Address when he claimed, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Invoking the sublime as a rhetorical device, prominent American thinkers and leaders appealed to each individual's sense of mastery to forge a nation with unified and exportable standards.

Captain America may embody the state and represent ubiquitous state power, but he is still an individual, and, as an individual, represents the ideal relationship between one man and his country. While state sponsorship renders his heroism more convenient (he, unlike Superman and Batman, never has to fight the U.S. military or police), it also weakens his efficacy. As Hannah Arendt claims in *On Violence*, power "belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps it together" (44). Captain America is only one man, albeit one superpowerful man, and cannot uphold government power alone. Like the state he embodies, he relies on communal support, from both other fictional characters and readers, to perpetuate and excuse his violence. Thus, *Captain America* comics simultaneously claim that the hero has omnipotent and limited authority. He is an individual citizen who upholds the state power that he embodies, excusing his own illegal actions while recognizing his limitations. His paradoxical position illustrates tension between the individual and the state, but ultimately relieves this tension by critiquing state power from the inside. As Žižek claims in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, ideology contains inconsistent, ironic subversions (45). The state's ability to encompass both dominant and resistant actions demonstrates its ideological power, and enables citizens to comfortably capitulate to that power. Using sublime technology to create a superhero, the government contains what Žižek would call "the impossible

Thing" by "reducing it to its symbolic status, by providing it with meaning" (71). By endowing each citizen with symbolic purpose, a democratic state demonstrates its containment of the sublime. Naming and directing Captain America's sublime superheroism, the government creates a hero who embodies, enacts, and upholds state power through subversive and disobedient violence.

5.4 "Smashing Thru": A Symbolic Fistfight

The first image of Captain America illustrates his superpowered violence in contemporary political context. The cover of *Captain America Comics #1* features the hero in the midst of a battle with Adolf Hitler. The caption reads: "Smashing thru, Captain America came face to face with Hitler…" And he does appear to be "smashing thru" – punching the dictator's face with such strength that it throws the enemy backwards, knocks his eyes closed, and collapses his jaw. The blow produces the same effect as the proximate bullets: a cloud of smoke and a bright white streak of pain emanate from Cap's fist. The Nazi soldiers that dot the edges of the scene look distraught, mouths agape as their bullets merely graze Cap's American-flag-patterned shield.[13]

The hero's red, white, and blue costume and shield show his investment in upholding U.S. power structures, and in the bottom corner of the image is a map of the country he protects. The pilot episode of *The Lone Ranger* ("Enter the Lone Ranger") also situated the hero in time and place with a map of the United States. The map's clear, bold boundaries established the nation's legal claim to the land in a historical period full of contested borders. In contrast, the map in the hands of Nazi soldiers appears flimsy

and exposed. The map is crude and disproportionate, its outline scratched and full of gaps. Written on the verge of a second world war, the comic shows the American landscape as porous and susceptible to attack. Hitler stands between Cap and the map, threatening to fall backwards onto the nation's rough reproduction, and a sheet of paper entitled, "Sabotage Plans for U.S.A." This first image of the hero in action presents the paradox of Captain America's embodiment of a sublime nation when he simultaneously demonstrates the individual's sublime capabilities and inherent weaknesses. Cap proves his competence in the face of foreign danger by easily assaulting America's principal enemy. But the image also challenges his and the state's power by portraying America as vulnerable. As propaganda, the image represents the foreign threat as urgent and impotent, dangerous and laughable, real and mythic. One individual soldier, Cap symbolizes the potential and justification for state violence, proving that America is capable of defending its borders, but he simultaneously embodies a critique of state power when he fails to fully protect the nation.

He makes an impressive effort, but Captain America is not entirely triumphant. One Nazi soldier remains in the background, undeterred and apparently directing an attack on a "U.S. Munitions Works" building. A black-and-white image on a television screen captures the building in the middle of an explosion – a mounted American flag flying in the debris. Because he cannot attend to all of the hazards in the room, Captain America may capably execute punishments but cannot prevent the terrible explosion that necessitated the punishing. As an embodiment of sublime state power, he attacks the most symbolically relevant threat – Hitler as the representation of pure evil – and showcases his mythic efficacy. But as an individual citizen, he cannot uphold omnipotent

state power alone and one Nazi soldier escapes his attention. The iconic cover image illustrates Captain America's immense physical strength. Breaking through the bars of a window, Cap erupts into the room, deflects bullets, and incapacitates the leader of the Nazi party. It also accentuates Cap's limitations as an individual citizen, even a super-strong individual. He can combat the symbolic evil of the Nazi party, embodying the nation's sublime superiority by demeaning Hitler, but he cannot physically stop the kind of inevitable violence that arises in war. Embodying and experiencing the force of a sublime nation, Captain America demonstrates each citizen's responsibility to see herself as subject of an omnipotent sovereignty and dedicated individual to a vulnerable state.

5.5 "A Character Out of the Comic Books"

The opening scene of this first issue establishes the nation's vulnerability. The story, entitled "Meet Captain America," describes a setting in which the "war-mongers of Europe" have infiltrated the American military and government. An enormous organization of Nazi spies has already attacked America from within, unsettling and disorganizing the entire social system by "paralyz[ing] the vital defense industries." Leaders can no longer trust their subordinates and vice versa: "An army spotted with spies – it's – it's *useless*!" Seeking methods to strengthen their organization, top military personnel meet with President Roosevelt to discuss the "vermin" who are "so firmly entrenched in [their] ranks." In the first example of what will later become a common trope in *Captain America Comics*, characters ruminate on the mythic potential of a comic book superhero. President Roosevelt suggests that a "character out of the comic books" similar to The Human Torch might solve the military's problem.[14] Roosevelt's speech

acknowledges the usefulness of superheroes in wartime politics – both within their fictional worlds and as symbolic concepts. A character "out of" the comic setting can unify citizens around an unambiguous hero and help them navigate turbulent political realities. This moment of self-aware metacommentary classifies Captain America as a symbolic figure who might strengthen the nation both within the pages of the comic and also in the real world.[15]

Shrouded in shadows, President Roosevelt tells the military that the FBI has been working on a solution to the state's infiltration problem. The head of the FBI, J. Arthur Grover, leads the military men to a bunker where a covert scientific experiment hides behind a secret door, guarded by an FBI agent disguised as an old woman. The layers of secrecy and the tone of the narration contribute to this scene's seedy atmosphere. The government is conducting experiments without the knowledge of the American people, in a "sinister-looking curio shop" full of "decrepit rooms" and "barred door[s]." After the "gnarled, bony" old woman leads them into a room full of complicated machinery, a stooped, eerily bespectacled scientist greets the military men. Though the old woman reveals herself to be an "astoundingly beautiful woman," and the journey through this underground lair eventually ends in a "surprisingly modern laboratory," the façade that hides the reality suggests that the government is devious if not unethical. The state hides its experiments from the electorate's eyes; it tampers with powerful, dangerous technology without the approval or knowledge of the populace.

When a "frail young man" steps into the laboratory, the government's rationale for its secrecy surfaces. "Don't be afraid, son…" a scientist tells the young man, "you are about to become one of America's saviors." Nameless and shirtless, the young man

stands on display before the group of military personnel as the scientist injects him with a "strange seething liquid." Jack Kirby's style highlights the disparity between scientist and patient: the scientist's outline is thick, clear and dark, and his face is shadowed, his eyes deep-set. Conversely, the ink marking the limits of the young man's form seems less defined, thinner and with minimal cross-hatching, portraying a face that is chiseled but sickly.[16] The drawing and shading styles indicate a difference in each character's status. The disheveled, stooped young man lacks dignity in his posture and position, while the scientist wears a lab coat, a sign of authority and expertise.

The scientist's assurance that the anonymous young man need not be afraid emphasizes the young man's naïveté and position as a human test subject. The comic depicts the moment of injection in two separate frames. First, in a circular insert between rectangular panels, the young man "calmly . . . allows himself to be innoculated [*sic*]." He stands facing forward, partially blocked by the scientist in the foreground. The narration's use of the passive voice accentuates both characters' anonymity; they are unnamed components in a vast government project. A bright red background surrounds the two forms, contributing to the scene's intensity. The next panel depicts the same moment in time from the point of view of the young man, facing the scientist in a close-up. The scientist thrusts the needle towards the young man, and, thus, towards the reader, the sharp point of the syringe hidden by the panel's border. Magnified until his face covers a quarter of the layout, the scientist not only dominates this frame, but also the entire page. His face is grotesquely wrinkled, lumpy and shadowed, and he gazes straight forward with a stern expression. With his starched white uniform and self-assuredness, the scientist is obviously directing the scene; he controls the young man's every

movement and turns the young man into a medical guinea pig. “It is done!” the scientist exclaims, “Now to watch the reaction –” When he does not clarify the “it” he performs, he implies that he cannot predict or control the “reaction” he anticipates. Representing the moment of injection twice, from a third-person and then first-person point of view, the comic asks the reader to consider the young man as both an essential American symbol and as a thinking, feeling subject. Submitting to this new, unknown technology, he is now both property of the government and an individual citizen.

The comic uses these visual and linguistic cues to create a patriotic hero through a critique of hegemonic power structures. The scene foreshadows a character who, over his long publication history, may reinforce and assail the status quo, actively uphold and undermine sovereign power, often in concurrent narratives. Just as other superhero texts subtly critique humanity’s dominion over nature, *Captain America Comics* provides an origin that questions the ethics and consequences of man’s sublime hubris. In this story, human mastery is not just a rational process; it also involves bodies, and the violation of bodies. By situating the locus of control and manipulation inside the human body, the comic contaminates the superhero’s autonomy, desecrating the common tropes of the genre. When the border between the young man’s identity and governmental interference dissolves, the genesis of the hero’s motivations, ethics, and violence becomes elusive.

Captain America is not born as a sublime superhero, nor does he embody the sublime through sheer force of will. Rather, he encounters the sublime in an unknown, man-made substance that enters his blood stream and irrevocably, unpredictably changes him. Injecting the serum, the scientist participates in a moment of technological mastery, forcing the sublime catalyst inside the young man’s body. The violation of the inside by

the outside forces the young man to confront, contextualize, and manage the sublime in relation to omnipotent government power. In *Strangers to Ourselves* Julia Kristeva discusses the subjective process of confronting an other: "I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container . . . . The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy" (286). As strange, grotesque figures circulate around the young man, observing his transformation from volunteer soldier to national embodiment, the comic depicts the moment of this superhero's creation as uncanny and painful. The serum becomes the "foreigner" that "lives within," converting the young man into an inhuman, sublime performance: "unamenable to bonds and communities" (Kristeva 264).

The moment of injection fragments the character. When the serum begins to take effect, the young man starts exhibiting signs of pain, rubbing his forehead and frowning in one panel, and then bending at the waist and using a table for support in another. A jagged, white aura surrounds him, and represents his interior pain as a vague, blinding pattern. Unknown technology now trespasses in the young man's subjectivity and changes him in undetermined, ultimately unknowable ways. The young man is now both himself and not himself. With both the sublime catalyst and the sublime experience internalized, the subject constantly feels the sublime and feels himself sublime, continually renegotiating his sense of mastery over his own body and mind. As Kristeva argues, the confrontation with the foreign object creates an endless process of identity formation, and a perpetual struggle to define the self in relation to the other. The sublime aesthetic becomes a continuous mental movement, with the subject fluctuating between

mastering the sublime object within himself – feeling himself superior to himself – and being mastered by that same object – recognizing his powerlessness to reject the sublime invasion.

The scientist attempts to explain what is happening in the young man's body, to demystify the sublime, but his explanation is necessarily vague. Again surrounded by an ominous bright red background, the scientist describes the transformation to his audience of military personnel:

> Observe this young man closely…Today he volunteered for the army service, and was refused because of his unfit condition! His chance to serve his country seemed gone! Little does he realize that the serum coursing through his blood is rapidly building his body and brain tissues, until his statue and intelligence increase to an amazing degree!

The military men admire the scientist's work, exclaiming from their observation booth, "It…works…it…*works!*" Beaming up at his impressive creation, the scientist exclaims, "Behold! The crowning achievement of all my years of hard work!" His body and mind an "achievement," the young man becomes a state-sanctioned apparatus. Clearly, the government never allowed this young man an opportunity to properly assent to this procedure. He does not "realize" the possible outcome of the experiment, but is merely a man who volunteered for service, at which point the United States government promptly commandeered his body and mind for experimentation. Without a back-story or even a name, the young man is a tool of the government, unknowingly and perhaps unwillingly undergoing a radical and dangerous medical experiment for political purposes.[17] The scientist designates the young man "Captain America." The ink that forms the young man's face becomes bolder and thicker, like the images of the scientist, as though the "Captain America" moniker secures the young man's identity, granting him precise form

and movement.

The mysterious serum produces a character who can impose violent authority with legal immunity and critically interrogate his moral and legal right to do so. As the serum works its way into his "body and brain tissues," it erases the difference between citizen and state. Fragmented into these two disparate positions, Captain America both embodies and experiences the sublime. His heroism is evidence of a sublime government's power over technology and mortality, a materialization of state authority. This clandestine experiment demonstrates the government's omnipotent control of the individual by exhibiting the state's ability to grant citizens illusory freedom, a sense of autonomy it might revoke at will. Experiencing the dissolution of the borders between outside and inside, Cap must reconcile his personal relationship to political structures. This tension between state and citizen plays out in Cap's psyche, sparking years of comic book soliloquies about superhero morality. The serum provides Cap with an understanding of his own greatness and superiority, but also a mistrust of the state's power to manipulate and infiltrate the self.

Other superhero origins describe moments of self-constitution, but Captain America's origin is a story about the other providing and determining the self. The scientist selects, injects, and names the young man to maintain control over the technological sublime. Žižek argues that naming the sublime catalyst transforms an object with physical properties into a conceptual idea and resituates it in the Lacanian symbolic realm (131). When the scientist designates the young man "Captain America," he ensures that the individual's experience of the sublime is dependent on those who created him. But since the residue of Cap's former life still informs his identity, his

heroic actions derive from the uncomfortable, internalized tension between state and citizen.[18] The text builds this contradiction into the origin story, using color, shadow, framing, and style to critique the superhero's constitution. Repeating the image of the syringe over multiple frames, the scene stresses that the government injects the sublime catalyst inside the character's body and psyche and creates a character that can both critique and support the status quo. Shadows and color choices cast suspicion on the violation of the young man's body, even as they render his heroism impressive. Cap is a paradox. Without the interference of the government, he cannot exemplify the American individual as self-determined.

5.6 Supersoldier Authority

Cap's first act of individual, state-sponsored violence occurs immediately following his construction. The scientist states that Cap is the "first of a corps of super-agents" and will eventually work with a unit to become a "terror to spies and saboteurs." However, upending the government's plans for a troop of supersoldiers, a Nazi spy suddenly shoots through the observation glass, yelling, "Death to the Dogs of Democracy!" The first bullet kills the scientist, a second bullet shatters the vial of serum, and a third kills the head of the FBI. Before the spy can inflict further damage, a "terrible vengeance in the form of Captain America leaps toward him!" Cap punches the villain so hard that the spy flails across the gutter between the two images, his body proliferated across frames.

Jack Kirby's dynamic and innovative artwork establishes Cap's physical dominance when it violates the gutter space. While a comic reader's eye can skip across

the page in a speed and direction that the comic cannot fully determine, these images draw lines through the gutter to direct the eye more forcefully.[19] Just as Cap's heroism emerges from the tension between his individuality and the invasion of the other, comic meaning is "both collaborative and competitive" (Gardner xi). Scott McCloud describes how readers and artists co-create meaning. An artist (or team of artists) divides the story into separate panels to encourage a reading pace through single moments in time. The reader then derives pleasure from imagining continuity, interpreting fragmented panels as coherent sequences (69). In superhero comics this often means that the reader is filling in gaps in violence; constructing a narrative from still panels, she imagines the trajectory and consequences of the hero's brutality.[20] In early *Captain America* comics, Kirby extends violent actions into the gutter, breaching the empty space that facilitates active reading. Instead of imagining the direction of flying bodies, the reader can see an effusion of bodies across the page. Cap's government-forged mind and body regulates and controls all violence.

But even when there is no traditional gutter space, comics depend on gaps and absences. Barbara Postema argues that comic reading is an "active, productive" process because still images in sequence are inherently static (xiv). She claims we read back and forth across the images, "weaving" panels together in a process she calls "retroactive resignification" (66). While Cap's violation of the gutter drives the action forward, his body is still frozen in time, repeated and fragmented. Though our minds might create continuity out of still images, continuity is evidence of our misperceptions. Captain America's movement through the page, in and through the gutter, demonstrates his narrative control, but it also draws attention to the artificiality of the form, as Postema

writes, "putting the narrative processes of comics on display" (xiv). Both the narrative and form of the origin story constitute a hero who embodies dominant and subordinate positions. Through the dissolution of boundaries – metaphysical, physical, and formal – the comic creates a character who easily adapts in any circumstance. Postema claims retroactive resignification occurs across the pages of a single comic, but Captain America demonstrates how readers might reinterpret continuity across decades of seriality.

Subsequent versions of the origin modify the outcome of Cap's fight with the Nazi spy; the spy always dies, but the circumstances of his death adapt to the hero's mythic purpose.[21] In this first version, the spy becomes "half-crazed with fear and pain" and collides with a jumble of complicated laboratory machinery: "He becomes enmeshed in powerful coils of wire which, like bands of death…cause a million volts of electricity to burn out his life!" Cap calls this death "well-deserved," a fortuitous twist of "fate," and denies culpability. J. Richard Stevens claims that this early version of the character ". . . displays a moral certitude that allows him to take life without guilt or reservation," and that Cap's callousness is evidence of the comic's "jingoistic, pro-war" agenda (42, 3). But just as the eerie, seedy laboratory setting casts suspicious on the government's intentions, the style in this fight sequence compromises the reader's faith in Cap's moral certainty. When Cap denies responsibility for the spy's death, his face is heavily shadowed, lined with thick black lines under his lowered eyes and hanging head. The same blood red background that surrounded the government scientist at the moment of injection now surrounds the hero. It is the only frame on the page that utilizes this color as a simplistic background, but red also colors other figures on the page: the spy crashes into a bright red piece of machinery that electrocutes him in a red burst of energy, and

another spy in a separate panel dons a red hat and jacket. By contrast, the rest of the images feature cool, calming colors such as blue and yellow. Through the use of red, the comic coordinates the actions of the scientist, the Nazi enemies, and Captain America, drawing attention to their similar methods of control. Red appears again in a panel that shows the superhero in costume; he is decorated in all the colors of the American flag, including the red that dominates these violent images.

In this first battle with the Nazi spy, Cap's violent heroism, forged in sinister circumstances, initiates a critique of state-sponsored, sublime technology that will follow Cap throughout the character's seventy-five years of publication. Cap feels the double movement of the technological sublime within himself; he experiences a continuous encounter with the sublime that simultaneously proves his superiority and inferiority, his competence and incompetence, and his independence and dependence. When the sublime moment is extended indefinitely, it can never culminate in the superior feeling that Kant describes. Without the ultimate sense of mastery, Cap's interpretation of his own heroism is inconsistent. David Nye describes American innovations through the 1930s and 1940s that eventually ushered in technologies that "had become so complex and inhuman that they could make a mockery of the individual" (254). While Nye argues that the "machine displac[es] the hero" (238), Captain America demonstrates how technology produces then constitutes the hero. The anonymous young man has no past, personality, or heroic proclivities before the serum takes effect. It is only after he has transformed into the superhero that he becomes dynamic, obfuscating the differences between his manufactured and original identities.

5.7 “A Symbol of Courage”: Individual Limitations

His persistent identity crisis leads Cap to constantly question his own morality as it relates to government power. Throughout these early years of the comic, many state-sanctioned authority figures assign Cap to various political tasks, and in each issue he must once again identify his values with and against government orders. This serialized renegotiation, made explicit month after month, underscores the ironic position of a free individual who enacts state power. Cap, under the guise of his alter-ego, Private Steve Rogers, often disobeys his superior officer, leaving his post in order to fulfill his state-sponsored superheroic duties. In these scenes Cap demonstrates how rebellious individualism can uphold hegemony.

Embodying both state authority and the potential resistance to that state, Captain America symbolizes the government’s control of elements both inside and outside its borders. Giorgio Agamben argues that sovereign powers retain control of a populace not by creating laws but by suspending laws. By deeming certain crimes “exceptions,” the sovereign “legally places himself outside the law,” and “confronted with an excess, the system interiorizes what exceeds it” (15, 18). When Cap frequently disobeys orders and kills his enemies without any democratic authority, the state establishes its power over all subjects, inside or outside the juridical order. When the state injects the scrawny young man with the mysterious serum, it effectively ends the life of the man and creates a symbol that justifies state authority to end life. The hero becomes an example of what Agamben calls “bare life,” or the human being that the government can control and manipulate at will. Governmental powers can penetrate the individual, claim the individual as government property, and as a result, use the concept of autonomy as a

propagandistic tool.

Captain America's origin story is ambiguous and self-aware, anticipating a character who may adapt in diverse political situations. Immediately following the origin story, this 1941 version of the character models the individual citizen's ethical allegiance to government power. By demonstrating its mastery over sublime technology, the state proves its superiority over nature. In relation to the state, the citizen may choose to either rebel or acquiesce, but he will never circumvent the sovereign; both his resistance and acceptance of hegemony uphold government power and American ideals. Cap demonstrates how the sovereign forges and is sustained by individuals who are personally invested in their own subjugation.

Captain America remains a stalwart example of heroic citizenship because he has limited individual power. Many superhero texts create dynamic, adaptable characters by critiquing the hero's moral authority. A character such as Batman executes an obsessive, hyperrational and effective violence, satiating his personal need for justice but frequently exacerbating criminality. In contrast, Cap's limitations as a single soldier in a global war force him to cooperate with the military and other citizens. As an embodiment of state power, his authority is absolute, but as an individual citizen, his heroic range is finite. The United States government tried to ensure their global dominance with a troop of superpowered soldiers, but the experiment concluded with only a single soldier who might help win battles but can never win the war on his own. Cap now "becomes a powerful force in the battle against spies and saboteurs!" whose name "becomes a symbol of courage to millions of Americans…and a by-word of terror in the shadow-world of spies!" A frame shows Cap running straight towards the reader, surrounded by

newspaper headlines that describe his heroic actions. Cap is ". . . Nation's No. 1 Spy Buster!", who ". . . Prevents Dam Explosion" and ". . . Nabs Spy!"; Cap cannot win the war for America, and must instead focus his attentions domestically.

Though the covers continue to depict Cap in the middle of epic battles with top Axis leaders, the stories between those covers pit the hero against domestic criminals and foreign spies. Even after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, beginning with *Captain America Comics #13* (published April 1942), Cap remains on American soil. The cover for *#13* depicts Cap punching Hirohito with images of the Pearl Harbor attack in the background. The hero exclaims: "You started it! Now – we'll finish it!" and a stamp in the corner urges readers to "Remember Pearl Harbor." Similar to other propagandistic wartime images common in the 1940s, Hirohito appears with exaggerated racial features: his fingernails are clawed, his teeth are fanged, and his lips are inflated. Towering over the battlefield, Hirohito and his forces advance on the American borders that Cap and Bucky valiantly defend by punching the Japanese general and stomping on his subordinates. The cover depicts the general as a racial other who threatens not only American lives, but also American values. Faced with this predatory, animalistic enemy, citizens and government must agree to enact and excuse extreme violence.

This cover serves a symbolic rather than a narrative purpose. Inside the pages of *#13* Cap fights a group of Asian spies with horns on their heads, called "The League of Unicorns," and explores a haunted lighthouse in search of his love interest, Betty Ross. Both stories only briefly reference the war to explain motivation or the potential consequences of sabotage and criminality, but neither story includes any explicit political content. Confining Cap to these domestic disputes, the comic demonstrates his weakness

as an individual soldier. Cap discovers foreign spies month after month because, as one man, he cannot excite quite enough "terror" to solve the problem of infiltration altogether. He is supposedly a Captain in the army, but Bucky is the only person he leads. Without a team of supersoldiers, Cap inspires through his symbolism and encourages other Americans to join the war effort. Though his fights remain on familiar soil, the aesthetic effects of his heroism reach global proportions.[22] In other words, much of his heroism is a rational idea rather than a physical reality.[23] He can serve as a symbol for individual power, but his individual sphere of influence is narrow.

5.8 Limited Individual Meets Omnipotent State

Captain America Comics #15, "The Tunnel of Terror!" (published June 1942), represents how a cohesive national identity depends on and incorporates individuality. The issue begins with two typical scenes. First, Captain America, disguised as Steve Rogers, angers his commanding officer and provokes punishment. Then, he and Bucky stop to admire the Statue of Liberty, or as Bucky calls it, "America's girl friend." In versions of these two moments, which occur frequently at the beginning or end of *Captain America* stories, Cap shows disobedience to power structures and reverence for the country those powers protect and uphold. Steve Rogers makes mistakes, purposely disobeys, and contradicts systems of government-sanctioned power. Immediately after his rebellion, he pontificates on the power of American symbolism, claiming, "Everything is O.K. as long as [the Statue of Liberty] is around!" Vacillating between moments of rebellion and respect, Cap shows that both responses to government power can occur simultaneously. By insisting that the individual has the right to verbally rebel,

the sovereign establishes its power over the critique, incorporating rebellion as an integral aspect of state power and an American ethos. The individual might criticize and dissent, but he is ultimately subservient to what he believes to be inherent national values. Cap can disobey his superior officer and remain an American hero as long as he maintains his patriotic allegiance.

These early issues of the comic celebrate America's careful balance between individual and state power by contrasting Captain America and his foreign enemies. In his frequent rebellions against his commanding officers, Cap insists on his individual freedom. And he expresses extraordinary contempt for those enemies who attempt to squelch nonconformity. In issue *#15*, after Cap and Bucky admire "America's girl friend," Cap uncovers a Nazi plan to "instill fear an' doubt into the minds of the people of New York." Sightseeing around New York City, Cap and Bucky encounter a political agitator addressing a crowd, yelling: "The wave of the future is upon us! It is useless to resist the axis powers…." Infuriated, Cap immediately subdues the man with a chokehold and throws him off his soapbox, informing the approving crowd, "Here's the way to handle the barbarian wave of the present!" Cap continues to meet "traitors" and "defeatist[s]" throughout the day, finally donning his costume and violently attacking a pessimistic sailor, claiming it is what the man "deserve[s]" for complaining that Americans "ain't got a chance against the Nazis!"

Realizing that the pervasive negative attitudes are a result of Nazi infiltration, Cap enervates the discouraged American citizens by fighting German robots, Nazi bodyguards, and a grotesquely strong enemy leader. His physical battles are helpful – he eliminates single enemies that have penetrated America's borders – but ultimately, he and

the citizens of New York recognize the hero's more urgent symbolic function. The mayor delivers a speech: "I appeal to the citizens to keep calm, and I appeal to Captain America, the fighting spirit of our country, to come to our aid!" Captain America, "as if in answer to the nation's prayer," answers his appeal. In the issue's denouement, Cap faces the people of New York, gazing sternly and directly at the reader, and states, "Now that we've licked this Nazi fifth column plot, folks, you can see how important it is not to believe planted rumors, fake reports, and terror propaganda! If London can take it…we can! So keep calm…do your duty…and America will triumph!"

Issue *#15* is one of many early *Captain America* comics to explore the dangers of brainwashing and propaganda. Enjoying the individual freedoms that America allows, the foreign enemy turns free speech against citizens, inciting fear and a dangerous complacency. Disgusted with what he considers treasonous rhetoric, Cap attacks the spies and free speech itself, using violence to "handle" dissenting, "unAmerican [*sic*]" views. As a representative of government authority, Cap suspends the citizen's right to voice opposition, suggesting that free speech is not a human right, but a government-granted privilege, one that may be denied at any time. Just as the foreign enemies in this issue use terror and propaganda to discourage Americans, Captain America uses violence and nationalistic symbolism to inspire them. Juxtaposing the enemy's brainwashing techniques with Cap's violent reactions to free speech, the comic subtly critiques the hero's fragmented national identity. Cap's individuality renders him fallible and explains his unethical and ironic attack on American legal rights. But though his tactics resemble those of the enemy, he remains heroic because his sublime embodiment gives him jurisdiction over the natural world. In the origin story, the government claims Cap's body

and mind, and thereafter marks any of his heroism, including actions that are unlawful and violent, as specifically American. Cap's heroism shows how the state can engulf and incorporate the rebellious individual. Because Cap is not an entirely righteous or omnipotent superhero, his deviations render the United States government sublimely powerful. As Jason Dittmer writes, ". . . the existence of nationalist superheroes, and their use of vigilante violence, can paradoxically be understood to buttress the state's claims to a monopoly of legitimate violence by taking the nationalist superhero's 'necessary' violence and linking it through name and visual motif to the state" (14-15). But while Dittmer believes that the comic excuses Cap's violence as an embodiment of justice and legitimate state power, issue *#15* deliberately represents the worrisome consequences of a paradoxical hero.

Cap's national embodiment always assimilates his individual violence; the state manipulates and uses the natural world, and Cap represents that mastery in his superheroic performance. Since his violence derives from his newly formed, fragmented identity, Cap avoids personal responsibility for any bloodshed. The origin story crafts a superhero who is both autonomous and national citizen, demonstrating the government's unconditional control over the individual. It is never clear whether Cap's patriotism derives from his self or from the serum, or whether his actions are determined or free. The violence in *Captain America* comics is more extreme and graphic than other contemporary superhero comics, but Cap remains unambiguously heroic as that violence slips between the fragments of his identity.

5.9 The Tempestuous Sidekick

As one man, even a man with impressive superpowers, Captain America cannot win the war in Europe. And although Captain America can perpetrate exceptional violence, he must also represent an innocent, defensive America in a politically tumultuous and devastating global conflict. In order to be effective as a symbol of American power, he needs the cooperation and faith of thousands soldiers who can enact the violent necessities of warfare. The cover image of *Captain America Comics #1* introduces Bucky Barnes, Cap's fearless, young sidekick, as a model for average citizens to emulate. The cover delegates rosy-cheeked Bucky to a separate frame in the bottom corner, removed from the action and saluting the reader alongside the caption: "Also, Captain America's young ally, Bucky." The image and caption suggests that Bucky is tangential to the action, relegated to a supporting role. Cap fails to prevent the Nazi attack on a U.S. munitions facility and exposes how much he relies on his sidekick. With the help of Bucky, who enables and sanctions Cap's power, the superhero might have been able to stop the explosion. Bucky's outward-facing salute demands audience participation, reminding readers that the comic relies on their financial and ideological support. To accept Captain America as a symbol of righteous nationalism, the reader must identify with Bucky, a sidekick willing to enact Cap's orders.[24]

At the end of the origin story, Bucky accidentally stumbles into Steve Roger's tent and discovers the older man changing into his Captain America costume. Cap first threatens the boy – "I ought to tan your hide!" – but immediately changes his mind and inducts Bucky into a partnership. Though Bucky now "fights side by side with Captain America against the vicious elements who seek to overthrow the U.S. government!" this

partnership is far from equal. As a product of sublime government control, Captain America is both authorized and limited by his political and symbolic role. In contrast, Bucky is a lowly army "mascot." The comic never fully explicates the presence of a pre-pubescent boy at Camp Lehigh, and Bucky's unusual, associative relationship to the military facilitates his violence without fully permitting it. The boy has seemingly unlimited access to army weaponry, and although he does not possess any superpowers and frequently finds himself in situations that necessitate a rescue, he is a remarkably athletic child, and often enacts the comic's most devastating violence. Bucky's immaturity leads him to make rash, emotional decisions. His anger often endangers the duo, but it can also help accomplish actions that Cap, who symbolizes an authoritative and innocent America, cannot.

In "The Gruesome Secret of the Dragon of Death!" (*Captain America Comics #5*, published August 1941) the army sends the "inseparable" duo to Honolulu, where a Japanese submarine disguised as a giant sea dragon, has caused "unrest among the natives." The submarine launches a second ship – an "oriental suicide squad" loaded with dynamite and on a mission to blow up a volcano. Captain America, "a tan, well-built figure," boards the explosive ship moments before the volcano erupts and the barge is "blown to pieces." Bucky watches from an American ship and yells: "Cap! Cap was still on that barge! . . . He's dead – Cap's dead – I-I – can't believe it – I – I – You dirty yellow devils! It's your fault that Cap's dead!" Then, "mad with anger" Bucky runs to a cannon on deck and proceeds to blow the entire Japanese submarine and its crew "to bits!!" Cap's internal experience of the technological sublime leads him to constantly renegotiate his relationship with government power. Though he embodies a sublime

sovereign, his coexistent status as an individual citizen forces him to rationalize his state-sponsored violence. Criminals get what they "deserve," and acts of "fate" propel enemies toward death. Bucky, an autonomous citizen lacking any sublime superpowers, behaves according to a wide variety of motivations. Fueled by emotions, not rationality, Bucky kills an entire ship's crew. Though Cap might also enact extreme violence, he claims that it is all for the benefit of the state. Bucky's emotional yet beneficial violence upholds state power when Cap cannot. When the comic reveals that Cap is still alive, the hero does not chastise his young partner for killing hundreds of Japanese men. Instead the duo happily embrace and swim back to camp, slipping back into their alter-ego roles. Though he cannot perform the violence himself, Cap does not discourage Bucky from doing so. Teamed with his more violent, unpredictable, emotional child sidekick, Cap can effectively eliminate national threats. Cap's heroism and national security depend on the violent cooperation of this autonomous citizen.

Bucky epitomizes the populace that Cap inspires. The sidekick justifies the superhero's violence by performing alongside rather than under Cap's control. He has his own unique project that does not always comply with Cap's embodiment of the ethical nation-state, and he kills anyone who stands in the way of America's political goals. Without the invasion of a technological sublime catalyst, Bucky is not psychologically fractured. He represents the complete and whole individual, and may act quickly and irrationally, motivated by pure emotion. While Cap is self-conscious about the tension between the citizen and the government, Bucky has completely internalized his role as a national citizen, killing according to patriotic desire and loyalty.

5.10 Conclusion

According to *Captain America* comics, ideal citizenship consists of two contradictory ideas. In order to embrace the American values of independence and individuality, citizens must resist group indoctrination, distinguishing themselves as unique and autonomous. In order to be effective in a global setting, every member of the community must act in concert to defend American values. Through Captain America's fractured superheroism, the comic simultaneously celebrates and mistrusts the individual.

The comic often articulates this contradiction when Captain America battles the recurring villain, the Red Skull. Appearing at the end of the first issue, the Red Skull models what happens when a citizen fully embraces his individuality, working towards selfish goals without any sense of civic responsibility. The Red Skull first seems to be a supernatural being, killing top military officials with only his glare. His uncanny appearance terrifies those he attacks, and images of his skull chanting, "Look at death! Look at death!" encircle his victims as they die. Always waiting until his victims are alone before he attacks, the Red Skull performs an elaborate ruse for men who will never bear witness. At the end of the issue, Captain America smashes the Red Skull's mask and reveals the villain's terrestrial identity. The Skull does not kill people by staring at them (demanding, "Stare into my eyes, Major! Look until you see *death*!!"), but rather injects them with a hidden hypodermic needle. Cap recognizes this behavior as strangely narcissistic, relaying Red Skull's plan back to the villain: "Your plan was to scare your victims out of their wits, and then inject this poison into them, making believe you killed them with your *eyes*!" The villain is not making his victims believe, making Cap believe, or making any American citizen believe, but simply "making believe." The Red Skull

hides the needle to make believe for himself, confirming his importance and potential as an individual, and insisting he is a supervillain even when there is nothing super about him. The final page of *Captain America Comics #1* reveals that the Red Skull killed for purely selfish reasons, seeking riches and a powerful position in the Third Reich.

With this second depiction of a hypodermic needle in this first issue, the comic juxtaposes the Red Skull's tactics and the government's technological manipulations. Just as the government used the secret serum to demonstrate its mastery over the mortal world, the Red Skull uses his deadly serum to end life according to his will. The comic implies that the Red Skull might have achieved global domination were it not for Captain America; the government constructed the superhero at a most convenient time. But endowing the villain with a weapon reminiscent of government technology, the comic challenges the state's moral authority. So although Captain America does embody the sublime state, his heroism is forged in his ability as a citizen to dissent, to recognize moral actions in the face of tumultuous political upheaval, and to uphold American values even in contradiction to American government. Government authority might be ambiguous and occasionally unethical, but a superhero who applies government authority as an individual is irrefutably courageous.

The Red Skull represents the dangers that the United States faces overseas: an enemy so formidable and sneaky that he seems supernatural. Every individual American citizen must express an interest in eliminating this enemy, merging their individual desires into a communal effort, even when that means upholding a government that might act against the values of the community itself. At the end of the issue, Captain America and Bucky defeat the Red Skull when they allow the villain to roll onto his own needle.

"But you saw it all – Why didn't you stop him from killing himself?" Bucky questions. And Cap relies, "I'm not talking Bucky!" Illustrating the moral dilemma in these clear terms, the comic explicitly questions Cap's heroism. His very existence casts suspicion on a government that can manipulate, empower, and destroy mortal life, but the scene also insists that this power is necessary and beneficial in wartime. By enveloping the critique of American power inside the celebration of this same power, the comics create a mythic text that inspires the reader to actively fight for American values (domestically and overseas) while simultaneously critiquing those same values. *Captain America* comics separate American government from American values, and then suggest that American values are best defended and maintained by the individual citizen.

Cap's constant renegotiation with the technological sublime inside himself is perhaps one reason why *Captain America* has remained in publication since 1940. Though the details of his origin story stay relatively consistent through multiple retellings, the character frequently refigures his relationship to government authority, transforming into both a symbol of counterculture rebellion and also a jingoistic freedom fighter.[25] In the most recent iteration of the character, the film *Captain America: Civil War*, Cap is a libertarian outlaw, actively opposing government interference. As political and historical circumstances change, Cap can alter his understanding of the unknowable sublime, shifting his identification as a national citizen. His adaptability has ensured his lasting popularity and consistent relevance.[26] The origin story stabilizes the character's relationship with government power, allowing his attitude towards that relationship to change over time. Cap's heroism encompasses rebellion and loyalty, vulnerability and

power, and nationality and autonomy. He is a contradiction, a paradox, an exemplary American citizen.

5.11 Notes

[1] In an interview with *The Star-Ledger*, Joe Simon said, "We both read the newspapers. We knew what was going on over in Europe. World events gave us the perfect comic-book villain, Adolf Hitler, with his ranting, goose-stepping and ridiculous moustache. So we decided to create the perfect hero who would be his foil." And in an interview for MTV he claimed Captain America "wasn't just meant to be a propaganda device – he was designed to be one of us, and to represent all of us as the best America has to offer. Just as Jack Kirby did when he was alive, I consider this to be the greatest country in the world, and Captain America is a reflection of that feeling."

[2] Many news articles during wartime speculated on whether or not soldiers were "supermen." Disturbed by the Nazi fascination with Nietzsche's übermensch (see Ruth Adler's "Speaking as One Superman to Another"), many newspaper reporters focused on the humanistic qualities of American heroes. A representative article claims, "He is no superman, this new United States Army aviator, although the tasks he has to perform seem Herculean to the ordinary earthbound mortal" (Copeland SM19). One article, arguing that the war was "fought by men, not supermen, and directed by captains, not demigods," suggests a popular desire for more vulnerable, realistic superheroes (Archambault E4).

[3] Goodman promised Simon and Kirby 15 percent of *Captain America Comics* sales and salaried positions at Timely comics, but immediately reneged on the deal, causing Simon and Kirby to leave the publication after just ten issues (Jones 200-2). Oversight on *Captain America* was transferred to a young Stan Lieber (pen name "Stan Lee") who would soon replace Goodman at Timely and rename the publication Marvel (279).

[4] The cover date for *Captain America #1* is March 1941, but comics most often list a cover date two or three months after the comic appears on the market.

[5] J. Richard Stevens notes that American isolationists criticized the new comic book as propaganda ("Rap with Cap" 608).

[6] *Captain America* was not the first comic book to reference contemporary politics in Europe. Sub-Mariner and Marvel Boy were both making fictional efforts to fight the Nazis, joining the resistance after France fell to German rule (Howe 18).

[7] Thomas Jefferson concluded his Second Inaugural Address by supplicating "the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with his providence, and our riper years with his wisdom and power." Declaring a state of national emergency in a radio broadcast on May 27, 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt quoted The Declaration of Independence: "With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

[8] Unlike other superhero comics that frequently retold and revised the origin story, *Captain America* did not revisit the origin until *Tales of Suspense #63* (March 1965).

Again exploring the character as a mythic symbol, this new origin adds details to the young man's back-story and creates a character who knowingly and willingly submits to governmental control. Though the character still represents both an acceptance and critique of American power, these later comics explore that critique in vastly different ways. I focus here on Cap's war years in order to examine his function as compared to other early superheroes.

[9] Kant claimed that man-made objects of "genius" were interested – created for a clear purpose – and so could no longer evoke "purely aesthetic" judgments or "mere judgment[s] of taste" (179). Theorists since Kant, such as Lyotard and Hans Gumbrecht, have explored the possibility for sublime presentations of art and man-made materials. See Lyotard's "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" or Gumbrecht's *Production of Presence*.

[10] Elaine Graham also talks about the desire of humans to "perfect themselves through technology" in a secularized world: humans, "having displaced the gods, achiev[e] heights of wisdom and self-aggrandisement" (66).

[11] Nye describes the transition from the natural sublime to the technological sublime as a "peculiar double action of the imagination by which the land was appropriated as a natural symbol of the nation while, at the same time, it was being transformed into a man-made landscape" (37).

[12] Jason Dittmer claims that Captain America helps "guarantee American geopolitical superiority" because the technology that creates him "symbolize[s] American scientific modernity," and, therefore, "American courage" (70).

[13] The initial design of Cap's shield was the object of some controversy when the publishers of another patriotic superhero, *The Shield*, sued Marvel comics for imitating their diamond design. In the next issue of the comic, Cap carries the circular shield that was to become an iconic part of his uniform (Scott 75).

[14] The Human Torch, another Timely Comics superhero, was created by Carl Burgos and first appeared in the anthology *Marvel Comics #1* (published October 1939).

[15] Thomas H. Fick claims that superheroes avoid the "social obligations of heroism" and, therefore, exemplify the American desire to maintain innocence while avoiding the "conscious exercise of power" (72-3). "The evasion is made easy because for the superhero society matters only as a generalized backdrop for his titanic battles with supervillains," and "his acts are tangential to the movements of mankind and are seldom involved in the complications of social or political life" (73). Of all the superheroes I discuss in this project, not one of them sees themselves as removed from social obligations. Even Superman, who eventually focused his attention on supernatural evils, began his heroism deeply invested in the New Deal. This instance in *Captain America* when FDR comments on the political and social function of superheroes is a clear example of the comics engaging in contemporary politics.

[16] Scott McCloud claims that the lack of details in a comic character's face creates a more "universal" image with which the reader can potentially identify (30-36). By "stripping down an image to its essential meaning" comics "amplify through simplification" (30). I believe lack of detail and simplification can provide much more than identification. In these panels the young man's spare face only works in conjunction with the scientist's detailed face to not only provoke the aesthetic effects that McCloud suggests, but to create political meaning within the origin story.

[17] A later retelling of the origin in *Captain America #109* (published January 1969) expanded the character's back-story by depicting a named young man, Steve Rogers, attempting to enlist in the military days before the experiment. It was not until *Captain America #255* (published March 1981) that the comics revealed information about the character's parents and childhood.

[18] Jason Dittmer argues the creation of a nationalist superhero like Captain America is "co-constitutive," evidence of the cooperation between "American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices" (2-3). He suggests that "a particular geopolitical order that reflects the desired role for the nation-state" narrates national identification that reflects notions of history as linear and progressive (125). Captain America represents an "attractive power of American values and leadership" that justifies "American power and authority" (141). I believe Captain America's interaction with the sublime within himself, introduced by government-sponsored power, but quickly rendered out of governmental control, allows Cap to consistently renegotiate his relationship to state power, rebelling in ways that sometimes reinforce the individual and sometimes undercut his freedom.

[19] Douglas Wolk describes the readers' experience with the comics page: "As a reader, you're ultimately in control of the speed at which the page progresses. You can linger over each panel; you can observe a tier or a page or a two-page spread as a composition and get a sense of the whole thing at once; you can look back at panels you've already read . . . or turn the pages backwards at will. And you can reorient yourself in the story with a glance, because you're got a visual cue for where you are on the page and in the narrative" (131).

[20] Wolk claims that because "comics omit far more visual information than they include" they create an "immersive experience" for the reader that evokes "leaps of the imagination" that "are an enormous pleasure" (132-3).

[21] In a retelling of the origin in *Tales of Suspense #63* Cap warns the spy: "Stop you fool! You're running towards the electrical omniverter! Look out!" In *Captain America #109* (published January 1969), Cap purposely knocks the Nazi spy into the machinery, killing him instantly. And in *Captain America #255* (published March 1981) he again pushed the spy into the machinery, but it is the spy's own mistakes, grabbing onto electrical wires as he "scramble[s] to free himself" that lead to his death.

[22] According to Joe Simon, Timely publisher Martin Goodman wanted Captain America to fight domestically because he believed that Germany would soon be defeated, and he

wanted to ensure the character's continued relevancy after the war (*Comic Book Makers* 43). Though practical monetary considerations influenced narrative direction, as they so often do in comic book publishing, I argue that Cap's domesticity produced a limited hero who continues to be relevant because of his political adaptability.

[23] Cap serves a symbolic function at the end of every issue when the comic encourages young readers to "become . . . member[s] of Captain America's Sentinels of Liberty." The advertisement asks kids to "Join Captain America in his war against the spies and enemies in our midst who threaten our very independence," and includes an oath for each reader to take: "I solemnly pledge to uphold the principles of the Sentinels of Liberty and assist Captain America in his war against spies in the U.S.A." Readers who joined would receive a "real official badge and a membership card!"

[24] Many superhero scholars claim that superheroes are meant as models for children (for examples, see Oropeza, Coogan, Lawrence and Jewett, and Garrett). Scott McCloud believes a primary function of the comic form is to promote identification. Frederic Wertham's infamous attack on comic books in *Seduction of the Innocent* depends on the theory that children will copy what they see in superhero texts.

[25] For more on Captain America's changing political affiliations see J. Richard Stevens *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon*.

[26] 2015's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* – which features Captain America in a prominent role as leader of the superhero team, The Avengers – broke box office records, earning $207,438,708 in its opening weekend ("Avengers").

CHAPTER 6

"NOW THAT WAS SOMETHING!": WONDER WOMAN'S SUBLIME OBJECTHOOD

6.1 "A New Type of Woman"

In December 1941 American psychologist, inventor, professor, and comic book writer William Moulton Marston introduced the world to a new superhero: Wonder Woman. First flying her invisible plane through the pages of *All-Star Comics #8*, Wonder Woman quickly became one of the most popular superheroes in comics, television, and merchandising; in seventy-five years, she has never been out of print. Though she has undergone many changes through her years of serialization, she has remained a feminist icon, inspiring readers through her fight to achieve justice by loving her enemies. Employing artist Harry G. Peter, a women's suffrage advocate and long-time newspaper illustrator, Marston began his Wonder Woman stories with overtly feminist intentions, believing that she represented a "new type of woman who should . . . rule the world" (Lepore 191). After leaving her home on Paradise Island to assist America in World War II, the Amazon warrior proved her dominance in both the natural and supernatural worlds.

Wonder Woman – or as she is known on Paradise Island, Princess Diana – was born through a process of magical animation and possesses immense strength, aim, and

speed. She is also in possession of a number of magical objects – a "magic girdle," an invisible airplane, and a "lasso of truth" – that aid her in her fight for equality, justice, and world peace. Once in the United States, she befriends a group of enthusiastic sorority girls and their leader, the corpulent, sweets-loving Etta Candy. With the help of this all-female gang and her handsome but clueless love interest, Steve Trevor, Wonder Woman fights Nazi spies and social injustice while also struggling to prevent a group of Greek and Roman gods from interfering in human politics. She often fights her battles on the border between the metaphysical realm of the gods and what the Amazons call the "world of men." As a result of this odd combination of evil forces, early Wonder Woman stories are surreal. H. G. Peter packs his images with visual information, employing an immense cast of characters and entangling them in bright colors and motion lines. Wonder Woman easily skips through all of the chaos, stopping bullets with her bracelets, throwing criminals into prison, and breaking every single chain that binds her, all to protect a country that she and the Amazons believe is "the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women" (*All-Star Comics #8*).

Wonder Woman enacts all of the standard tropes of the American superhero genre: fighting in costume against those who seek to destroy democracy, she performs superpowerful feats according to her own personal maxim. But though Wonder Woman stories are in many ways generic, her gendered performance of feminine ideals makes her unique in the stereotypically masculine pages of early comic books.[1] From the first panel, Wonder Woman narratives examine how a superpowered female body can both enact and challenge masculine genre tropes. She first appears in action. A brilliant yellow background surrounds her as she stares determinedly forward, pumping her arms and

jumping through the air, a slight smile at the corner of her lips. Her star-spangled culottes float around her thighs, revealing muscular, yet slender legs and high-heeled red and gold boots. "At last, in a world torn by the hatreds and wars of men," claims the introduction, "appears a woman to whom the problems and feats of men are mere child's play – a woman whose identity is known to none, but whose sensational feats are outstanding in a fast-moving world!" (original emphasis). The comic foregrounds this superhero's gender in both image and text, giving her distinctly feminine features, showing amounts of skin that sparked a conservative outrage, and presenting the character as a feminine balm to a masculine society's wounds. She is "outstanding" because she is a woman, and she will solve the world's problems that other superheroes not only cannot solve, but also, as males, only provoke.

Her feminine charms were precisely what Fredric Wertham worried about in *Seduction of the Innocent*, a 1954 polemic that sparked a nation-wide attack on the comic book industry. He famously argues that Wonder Woman excites lesbian fantasies: "The homosexual notation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable" (192). "For boys, Wonder Woman is a frightening image. For girls she is a morbid ideal. Where Batman is anti-feminine, the attractive Wonder Woman and her counterparts are definitely anti-masculine" (193).[2] While the rhetoric surrounding sexuality has changed through the years, critics still interpret Wonder Woman's sexual appeal as evidence that she is a passive fetish. Claiming that she is an object of the male gaze, these scholars are often interested in the character's physical appearance.[3] They write about Wonder Woman's skin, her hair, her muscles, her stature, and her facial features. They assume that her immodesty, the way she bares her body in a world that

demands it covered, is meant for the reader's pleasure – "a frank appeal to male fantasies of sexual domination" (Reynolds 34) – and they often consider this pleasure evidence of objectification, an unfortunate, even offensive, aspect of the comics. As Kelli Stanley argues, "[Wonder Woman's] straight male target audience is not expected to identify with a woman, only sexually objectify her" (166).[4] According to Mitra Emad, "Hypersexualizing Wonder Woman's body assures that female power is reigned [*sic*] in, tacitly directing the primary purpose of the body decorated in nationalist iconography to be an object for male sexual pleasure" (982).

Reacting against these negative interpretations of Wonder Woman, divergent scholars focus on her gender and sexuality when they designate the character as a feminist role model.[5] They examine the way Wonder Woman's female body conforms to the cultural context and gendered limitations of a patriarchal society, and many argue that Wonder Woman's bodily display tempers, though does not undo, her heroism. In *Tough Girls* Sherrie Inness claims that Wonder Woman "challenge[s] gender stereotypes" but is "caught up in a search for beauty that can be dangerous" because she is "more concerned about maintaining a meticulous manicure than winning a sword fight" (143-4; 161). And the film *Wonder Woman! The Untold Story of American Superheroines* (2012) argues that while Wonder Woman acts as a powerful role model for girls, the comics' treatment of her as a sexualized object exposes the limited representation of girls and women in media. Alison Mandaville specifically takes issue with the character's "curvy, stereotypically attractive figure" that marks her as "less than empowering" (205). Though Ben Saunders in *Do the Gods Wear Capes?* believes Wonder Woman's power partially derives from her beautiful body, he argues that her ability "to be both beautiful *and*

strong, to be nurturing *and* independent, to be emotional *and* intelligent, to be assertive *and* kind" (60, original emphasis) does not demonstrate the power of her femininity so much as it "deconstructs the binary of man/woman" (37). Though there are a few exceptions, Noah Berlatsky's reading of gender in *Wonder Woman: Bondage and Feminism in the Marston/Peter Comics, 1941-1948* being one of them, most critics consider Wonder Woman's candid sexuality a hindrance to rather than a constitutive aspect of her heroism.

Wonder Woman is somewhat unique in the world of early American comic books because William Moulton Marston (also known by his pen name: Charles Moulton) had an unprecedented amount of authorial control over her various representations in media until he died in 1947. While many people were involved in the production of Wonder Woman comics as artists, publishers, and consultants (Harry G. Peter, artist Elizabeth Burnley Bentley, publisher Maxwell Charles Gaines, writer Joy Hummel, and consultants Lauretta Bender and Dorothy Roubicek), Marston dictated the representation of this character who always promoted his agenda. Unlike in *Superman* or *Batman* comics, where different creators were responsible for different aspects of the characters and proper credit was notoriously vague, Marston documented his intentions for every aspect of his character. The wealth of documentation from Marston and his estate has led some critics to focus on his intentions as evidence of the character's feminist potential. As Michelle R. Finn claims, "the character's feminism is certainly open to interpretation," but "her creator's intentions are clear" (7). In her book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* Jill Lepore describes Marston's prominence in scientific and academic communities, his creation of the first lie detector test, and his nonconformist relationship

with two women: Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne, niece of birth control advocate, Margaret Sanger. Using Marston's personal history as evidence, Lepore and other historians and comics scholars consider early *Wonder Woman* comics representative of feminist thinking in the 1940s, and it is clear from Marston's private and public writing that he intended the character as a model for a new kind of gendered thinking, one that divests masculinity of power and situates the locus of ethical behavior in the feminine.

Marston wanted Wonder Woman to inspire boys and girls to consider femininity a strength. In a 1942 *All-American Comics* press release in which he revealed himself to be Wonder Woman's creator, he wrote:

> Wonder Woman was conceived by Dr. Marston to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; and to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in athletics, occupations and professions monopolized by men. (Lepore 220)

So while many critics argue that the comics' display of Wonder Woman's body is a source of voyeuristic pleasure for the reader and is, therefore, objectified, Marston insisted that Wonder Woman derives her power from her female body and its display. She embraces the outward appearance of femininity because her body serves as a model for femininity's potential. For Marston, "strong, free, courageous womanhood" does not belong solely to the realm of the metaphysical, but derives from sensible gender differences. Women will not rule the world alongside men, but in place of men because they can embody a superior position of femininity, a position that most men, and certainly all male superheroes, have rejected as weak. Wonder Woman derives strength from a female body that is subject to harsh social restrictions, but demonstrates heroism

by breaking through those restrictions.

While Marston's biography is irresistibly fascinating, full of sexual kinks and bizarre scholarly pursuits, his personal history is not what initially made Wonder Woman popular and it is not what sustained her popularity for the next seventy-three years. Marston wanted readers to see Wonder Woman as an embodied character in a way that graphic narrative encourages.[6] By housing immense heroism and violence in the body of a beautiful woman, he encourages readers to observe an essentially powerful femininity, suggesting that physicality can induce both pleasure and fear simultaneously. As a part of a slew of superhero appearances in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Wonder Woman's popularity helps illustrate a public fascination with the unbelievable and fantastic. Like Superman, Batman, and Captain America who populated the superhero comics before her, Wonder Woman engages with the sublime in a way that legitimizes her power and authority and ensures her public appeal. But Wonder Woman claims an uncommon relationship to the sublime. While Enlightenment theorists like Burke and Kant separate aesthetic responses into the beautiful and the sublime, Wonder Woman claims a physical body that evokes both the beautiful and sublime at once; she is sublime because she is beautiful and she is beautiful because she is sublime. Combining both aesthetics into a singular experience, Wonder Woman evokes and embodies a sublime that does not exceed the sensible, but rather depends on physicality.

6.2 "Like the Crash of Thunder from the Sky": Sublime Wonder Woman[7]

In his *Philosophical Enquiry* Burke divides aesthetics into a gendered dichotomy, claiming that women provoke and experience the beautiful while men have the rational

capacity to experience the sublime. Attempting to maintain strict gender binaries, Burke argues that strength, power, "strong impression[s]," and "quick transition[s]" produce the sublime (73). He associates these qualities with masculinity and claims that women are more inclined towards the beautiful: "Both sexes are undoubtedly capable of beauty, and the female of the greatest" (89). The beautiful is "no creature of our reason" and so "we must conclude that beauty is, for the greater part, some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses" (102). So while the sublime is "one of the most affecting" aesthetics because it produces "admiration, reverence, and respect" (79; 53), "The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity" (106).

However, Burke's division destabilizes when he identifies specific objects that produce the beautiful or the sublime. In a famously slippery passage, he describes a beautiful woman:

> Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. (105)

Though he argues that this woman is beautiful because her body contains "gradual variation[s]," his description of her as a "deceitful maze" that causes the eye to become "unsteady" and "slide" recalls his explanation of the sublime as "obscur[e]," "crouded," and "confused" (57). Feminist aesthetic theorist Barbara Freeman writes about this passage: "This body does not provide a site where distinctions can be fixed but rather represents the point at which they come apart" (50). The passage suggests that the division between the sublime and the beautiful is porous and superficial, and that men

and women might experience and evoke either aesthetic.

In an early work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant agrees with Burke's gendered aesthetic division, claiming that "Women have a strong inborn feeling for all that is beautiful, elegant, and decorated" (77), while men have "a *deep understanding*, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime" (78; original emphasis). In the later *Critique of Judgment*, Kant emphasizes the division between the two aesthetic feelings by arguing that aesthetic judgment is disinterested, independent of the physical reality of the object. Aesthetics are subjective, constituted by the various interactions between mental processes (44). While beauty consists of "free play of the presentation powers," or the moment in aesthetic judgment when our imagination and understanding are in "reciprocal harmony" (62-3), the sublime is a "violent" confrontation between imagination and reason that proves the "inadequacy" of the sensible (99, 106). Kant does not directly state that the different aesthetics pertain to different genders in this later work, but as Freeman argues, his delineation of the two aesthetics "is not sexually neutral." The sublime marks the moment that a dominant mental power transcends a weaker one, becoming "an allegory of gender relations within patriarchy" (Freeman 72).

Though women writers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries depict female characters experiencing the sublime, Burke and Kant's association of the aesthetic with masculinity persists into the 20th century.[8] By delineating aesthetics into categories with defined borders, Enlightenment philosophers turn the sublime into what Freeman calls a "strategy of appropriation" (3). A subject justifies his use of nature when his powers of reason subjugate and sacrifice his inferior powers of imagination. This theory of

aesthetics bisects subjects and objects, inside and outside, reason and imagination, male and female, sublime and beautiful. But when Burke slips between beautiful and sublime discourses, he demonstrates the malleability of aesthetic categories. He describes a cacophony of powerful, imprecise emotional responses, a merger of the beautiful and the sublime situated on the body of a woman.

In his *Wonder Woman* comics, Marston maintains the idea that woman, as object, is beautiful. Wonder Woman constantly evokes the beautiful, displaying her female body in public settings and arousing the love of the men and women who populate her narrative world, but her status as a beautiful woman does not prevent her from concurrently evoking the sublime. Her body is both pleasing and admirable; it is soft and smooth and powerful and loud; it encourages both love and terror. Freeman argues that a feminine sublime "presents the subject with an unrecuperable excess of excess" (11). Wonder Woman, blending all the dichotomies of Enlightenment aesthetic theory, is an object in excess. As both a pleasurable and terrifying object, her beautiful and sublime body justifies a particularly feminine brand of violent heroism.

While the superhero genre is always interested in how subjects can experience, embody, and evoke the sublime, Wonder Woman is unique because she represents an essentialist account of femininity. The result is a text that follows Kant's logic of the sublime to a point, representing the aesthetic as a struggle between sensible experience and reason, but then rejects Kant's claim that reason can ever even approach a comprehension of the sublime. Rather, the sublime in Wonder Woman is dependent on the sensible, and thus, the sublime catalyst always remains mysterious, nebulous, powerful and unconstrained. While other superhero texts use the comics form to

represent the hero's interior experience of the aesthetic, *Wonder Woman* texts focus on the character's exterior state, her display and performance of a female body. When Wonder Woman evokes a sublime that insists on its own excess, maintaining its chaotic and undefined power, it still also insists on the essential qualities of gender binaries. Claiming that certain traits like the capacity for love and diplomacy are innately female, *Wonder Woman* turns the hero's body into an object that determines the self.

Critics are wrong when they argue that Wonder Woman's embodied representation proves her adherence to patriarchal control. The character is not less powerful because she has curves, as Mandaville suggests, but more powerful because her curves collapse a beautiful and sublime aesthetic into a singular experience. Marston attempts to induce admiration and awe for the female body, an object that can perform impossible, incomprehensible tasks week after week, breaking through any bonds that suppress it in a repetitive struggle against a misogynistic culture. For Marston, essentialism and gender binaries do not exclude one gender from experiencing the sublime, but instead prove that aesthetic reactions are always dependent on physical stimuli. Wonder Woman is not just a superhero who happens to be female; she is a superhero because she can evoke the beautiful and the sublime with her female body. She can enact pleasure and pain simultaneously, and this disintegration of binaries constitutes her superiority as a superhero.

If femininity includes a series of essential traits, which the physical attributes of the body dictate, then a woman becomes a kind of object, determined by biological imperatives. In other words, the curves of her body do not indicate a lack of power, but they do determine Wonder Woman's interiority. Attempting to prove that women possess

unique and essential powers, Marston sutured a concept of the feminine to a physical female body, creating a character whose femininity motivates every decision. Unlike a character like Batman, who justifies his heroism through constant deliberation, Wonder Woman is a body in action, rarely pausing to think of the purposes for or consequences of her violent confrontations. As Jennifer Stuller points out, "Because there's essentialism in the work of [Marson, his] belief that women are the superior sex makes for a difficult feminist interpretation" (49). As sales figures, endless iterations across media, and countless Comic-Con costumes and panels prove, women have long interpreted the character as a feminist icon. Perhaps noting that their bodies seem to be the source of their oppression, women are eager to see Wonder Woman's body as the source of her heroism.

For Marston, the problem with patriarchal systems is not that they attempt to objectify women, but rather that they believe that they can fully explain and contain the object through objectification. By representing the female body as a sublime object, he contradicts this account of objectification and insists that the powers of reason cannot always contain and control the sensible object. As a feminist text, *Wonder Woman* does not reject the designation of woman as object, but rather refigures the female hero as sublime object, an object that retains both autonomy and physicality. Wonder Woman, as sublime object, dismisses Kant's notion that reason might overpower and control imagination, and instead reasserts her power and authority as a physical presence that knows no humanly definable limits, boundaries, or definitions. Collapsing the two aesthetics – the beautiful and the sublime – into a single judgment, Wonder Woman demonstrates how the beautiful can provoke an inexhaustible sublime that never

capitulates to the powers of reason.

As the text focuses on subjective reactions to Wonder Woman rather than on her own subjectivity, it becomes most often about experiences of Wonder Woman and not the experience of being Wonder Woman. She is the sublime object that inspires the aesthetic feeling in others, so her power expresses itself as others encounter her. While other superhero origin stories begin with the hero's initial experience of the sublime, then, Wonder Woman's origin, steeped in Greek mythology and feminist tropes,[9] describes the character completely at ease with her own powers.[10] By the time Steve Trevor crash-lands near Paradise Island for the first time in *All-Star Comics #8*, Princess Diana of Themyscira (later to take on the designation Wonder Woman) is already super. Daughter of the Queen of the Amazons, Diana is the fastest, strongest, and most resourceful woman in a world of superpowerful women. According to Kant and Burke, the sublime requires an element of fear. Confronting the immeasurably large or strong sublime catalyst, the subject feels fear without feeling danger and is, therefore, able to let his powers of reason work to comprehend the object. Princess Diana never feels fear. At no point in her origin story does she feel even slight discomfort, and even in the subsequent face of overwhelming danger, she quips and puns and dances around her enemies with apparent glee. Obviously, Diana is not overcome by her own impossible powers as she sees them reflected constantly in the women around her.

Though Diana never seems to feel fear, her actions do inspire fear in others. When the subject cannot master the sublime through reason, when the object constantly slips out of the control of the subject, the fear of the sublime is consistent and infinite, never relenting. In Kant's view of the aesthetic, the sublime is ultimately a subject-affirming,

positive feeling, but here the sublime is always renewing the subject's unease and discomfort. Those who confront Wonder Woman cannot understand her, and their lack of understanding unsettles their sense of self. Unable to place themselves in a hierarchical, or even dichotomous, relationship with the female superhero, they ultimately bend to her control. So while the sublime is effective for Wonder Woman, ensuring her success as a hero, its never-ending presence provokes those who observe her to feel a distressing lack of closure.

Since Marston wanted the character to serve as a role model for female potential, he created a hero that was both powerful and appealing. His example of ideal femininity, then, must please those who encounter her and inspire them to willingly submit to her moral authority. Burke claims that beauty "excite[s] love" and is a somewhat superfluous feeling (135, 145),[11] but Marston insists that an object can simultaneously evoke the beautiful and the sublime, combining a feeling of love with what Burke calls "awe, reverence, and respect" (123). A beautiful object that also evokes the sublime suggests that love and fear are not entirely discordant emotional responses. The beautiful and the sublime are entangled in the physical form of Wonder Woman: the sublime object is beautiful, and the beautiful object inspires the sublime. Those who encounter her sense Wonder Woman as both a pleasing and frightening experience. In the face of the indefinable object, the terrifyingly beautiful Wonder Woman's enemies are trapped in a repetitive cycle of desire, fear, and admiration. And it is this cycle, the predictability of her enemies' aesthetic reactions, that ensures Wonder Woman's inevitable triumph.

6.3 Wonder Woman's Love

Though the comics rarely delve into Wonder Woman's subjectivity with any kind of complexity, they do consistently depict the character's most prominent emotional response: love. After a brief introduction of the hero – "As lovely as Aphrodite – As wise as Athena – With the speed of Mercury and the Strength of Hercules" – *All-Star Comics #8* situates the reader over a jungle civilization as Steve Trevor's plane runs out of gasoline and crashes into the ground below. "Two beautiful figures," Princess Diana and her friend Mala, clad in halter top bikinis and green tutus, "race towards" the fiery wreckage without hesitation. Diana does not pause when she discovers the first man she has ever seen, and instead picks him up in her arms and holds him to her chest "as if he were a child." At the Paradise Island hospital, Diana stays by Steve Trevor's side, and the doctor and Diana's mother, Hippolyte, begin to suspect that the princess is in love. Looking onto the helpless, prone body of the man, Diana feels the beautiful.

Often it is Wonder Woman's own ability to feel the beautiful, described in the text as love and compassion, that provokes the combination of the beautiful and the sublime in others. Wonder Woman's origin story illustrates her capacity to please and terrify simultaneously. Witnessing her daughter's emotional response to the new man, a distressed Hippolyte declares, "I was afraid of that!" In the next panel Hippolyte expresses her fears to her daughter: "I was afraid, Daughter, that the time would some day arrive that I would have to satisfy your curiosity. Come – I will tell you everything!" While the sudden and violent confrontation with an entirely new human form evokes mild shock from the Amazon women, the potential for Diana to feel love towards the new form scares her mother. Fear repels Hippolyte from the man; she wants to ban her

daughter from seeing him, but love attracts Diana to Steve Trevor, inspiring a kind of desperate curiosity: "But mother" Diana exclaims, "I don't understand – I *must* see him! I must know who he is. How he got here! And why he must leave? I – I love him!" (original emphasis).

Hippolyte explains the Amazon's isolation in an origin story, describing the beautiful and the sublime working in concert to produce power. Hippolyte recounts a mythic past when women – under the guidance of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty – ruled the "foremost nation in the world." Embarrassed by his inferiority, Hercules challenged Hippolyte to a duel and beat her through "deceit and trickery," stealing the "MAGIC GIRDLE" (written throughout the origin story in capital letters) that Aphrodite has bestowed to the Amazon queen. Hercules and his men forced the queen and her followers into "submission" for an almost "unbearable" period of time. But then, with the help of Aphrodite, Hippolyte reclaimed her magic girdle, escaped the world of men, and established her own colony on Paradise Island. She promised Aphrodite that the Amazons would always "keep aloof from men," and, in return, Aphrodite promised the Amazons eternal life.

Though it is the female Amazons who undergo a painful cycle of defeat and victory, this origin story associates fear with masculinity. Already sure of their cultural and political dominance as a "foremost nation," the Amazons accepted the challenge from the injured, emasculated Hercules because Hippolyte knew "she could not lose." Hippolyte is very clear that in hand-to-hand combat, "win [she] did!" But Hercules, afraid of "taunts," lies and cheats in order to enslave the Amazon women. Hippolyte's mistake does not lie in engaging in hubris or even violence, but in her mere association

with a man, an inferior and fearful gender. In Kant's account of the sublime, the subject "consider[s] nature as a might that has no dominance over [him]" only after an object "arous[es] fear" by initially provoking a feeling of inadequacy and emasculation (119).[12] Man's insecurities in the presence of nature – the sublime catalyst – cause him to feel the need to express his mastery. When the Amazon women, with their access to the gods and their eternal life, slip out of his control, they prove that man's sense of mastery cannot contain the sublime catalyst. Hippolyte, in her unfailing confidence, never engages with a sublime aesthetic, and, instead, experiences faith in the goddess of beauty. With this faith, she wields the power of a "magic girdle." Long associated with female virtue and chastity, the girdle here does not restrict sexual power but rather enhances and channels it. The nebulous magic of the girdle evokes the sublime, and its association with the beautiful allows the girdle to remain sublime, unexplainable and in excess. As a physical object around the waist of the Amazon queen, the girdle prolongs the aesthetic; Hercules and his men cannot rationalize and, thus, control its power. The comics emphasize the power of the girdle through the shape and form of the text, spelling the word in capital letters, and showing how the text itself is dependent not only on symbolic interpretations, but also on sensible understanding. Dedicated to the power of Aphrodite and the magic girdle, Hippolyte is without fear and only experiences the beautiful. In her demonstration of love and the strength that derives from love, she escapes the grasp of her opponent. Her dedication to beauty enables her power and subsequent victory over men.

To retain that power, Hippolyte promises Aphrodite that she will never allow men to enslave her people again. She tries to convince Diana of the danger of "so called man-made civilization," and encourages her daughter to gaze into the Magic Sphere, an object

of omnipotence that reveals past and current realities throughout the world. Looking into the sphere, they see the world of men as a bleak, violent place. Artist Henry G. Peter represents Paradise Island as bright and open, a lush green landscape dotted with white, Greek-inspired architecture. In contrast, he depicts contemporary America as shadowed and bleak, with a predominance of browns and blacks. Just like Hercules and his men, the misshaped, lumpy Nazi spies use "deceit and trickery," an innate masculine trait, to kidnap Steve Trevor and bomb American forces. Again, this story accentuates masculine fear: the army general's fear of "losing" Steve – the "most valuable man in the army intelligence department" – the American troops' fear of being bombed, and the spies' "alarm" and "panic" when their plan begins to go awry. The world of men is dangerous and violent, full of lies and manipulation and a desire for rationalized mastery and dominance.

After listening to Hippolyte tell the story of the Amazons' history and witnessing the violence inherent in a patriarchal world, Diana rejects the traditions of her matrilineal ancestors and expresses her desire to stay with Steve. Even after Hippolyte describes years of danger and violence at the hands of a mythical patriarchy, Diana shows no fear in relation to men. Perhaps this reaction is merely a result of a life completely free from violence and masculinity, but, just like Hippolyte in her origin story, Diana also has supreme confidence in her own abilities. She believes returning Steve to America "wouldn't be any trick at all" for her, so she secretly enters a contest that will determine which Amazon will fly Steve home. Without "trick[s]," Diana's heroic abilities depend on physical prowess and not deceit or rationalizations. Demonstrating these superpowers, she wins the contest, therefore "giving up her heritage, and her right to eternal life." But

the narration assures us that Diana will be happy in her new home with "the man she loves" and the country "she learns to love and protect, and adopts as her own!" Hippolyte, Athena, and Aphrodite agree America is "the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women," a country with the possibility "for liberty and freedom" for "all womankind!" In other words, America is a space for Diana to distinguish herself as a sublime and beautiful object, an example of an infinitely powerful physical self.

Abandoning her claim to eternal life, Diana makes an aesthetic choice about how her new community will perceive her. She rejects what Kant calls the mathematical sublime, and instead commits to her love of Steve and her new, patriotic love of country. She continues to look at the world outside herself as beautiful and full of love and peace, even when she transports herself to a war zone where she must battle Nazis and evil, covert agents. Her preclusion of a sublime experience of her own, combined with her prolonged engagement with the beautiful constitutes her heroism. The comics maintain that her intentions are selfless, and that she does not wish to order the world according to her own, Amazonian rationality, but rather to stop harmful actions that might disrupt what once was beautiful in nature.

6.4 A Wonder Woman in a Man's World

Though Diana commits to her own experience of the beautiful at the expense of the sublime when she acts according to love, her choice does not exclude others from experiencing her as both beautiful and sublime. Hippolyte renames her daughter "Wonder Woman," designating her as a figure who might evoke a subjective response in others. The word "wonder," meaning "a feeling caused by seeing something that is very

surprising, beautiful, amazing, etc.," is an appropriate name for a character that combines the beautiful with the sublime ("Wonder"). She inspires Burke's "positive pleasure" while also producing "astonishment," "admiration, reverence, and respect" (53). And her name, "Wonder Woman," asserts that it is specifically her female body that produces "rapt attention or astonishment at something awesomely mysterious or new to one's experience" ("Wonder"). The cover of the second comic book to feature Wonder Woman (*Sensation Comics #1*, published January 1942) depicts the hero jumping – or, perhaps, skipping – towards her opponents, deflecting their bullets with her bracelets. A disembodied, bright yellow spotlight surrounds her muscular and carefree body; her expression seems serene and happy as she stares outward, not even glancing at the life-threatening weaponry before her. Three men crowd the bottom of the image, staring at Wonder Woman with expressions of shock and fear, mouths open as they shoot at her and dodge her attack. The cover captures this moment of awe, as the men stare at this fantastic human, unable to comprehend a woman so powerful and agile. While Wonder Woman is at ease with both her own powers to leap through the air and also the steady stream of bullets flying at her, the men cannot look away from the sight of her impossible physical form. Two of the men's hats appear to leap off their own heads, a common comic trope that signifies astonishment. Following the eyeline of the violent men, the reader imagines the sight of Wonder Woman from their visual perspective, perhaps agreeing with the cover's description of the character as "sensational." Attempting to control their experience with the superhero, these men resort to tactics that Marston has clearly associated with masculinity: they try to murder the figure in front of them, but she easily evades their violence.

The first page of *Sensation Comics #1* repeats this imagery, showing Wonder Woman calmly deflecting bullets. In this image at least six men, perhaps more, gather around the superhero. From their position in the frame, it is impossible to determine whether the men are clambering to get closer to or escape from Wonder Woman. Their bodies fall over each other in a chaos of limbs and guns. Streaks of red light and motion lines produce a kind of oval around the hero to create a sense of indeterminate, frenzied motion. The perspective seems impossible, as men tumble through the air in a mass of bodies. Steve Trevor stands, flexing, by Wonder Woman's side with a grimace on his face, but he is otherwise ineffective, protected by the circular motion of Wonder Woman's arms. While the image establishes the character's heroism through her display of superstrength, the image is also jumbled and confused, an amorphous puzzle of male bodies. These men cannot understand their sensible perceptions of the woman in front of them; they face in all directions in a state of simultaneous attraction and fear. Within these first few images of patriarchal society, *Wonder Woman* comics establish masculinity's fearful commitment to violence through the chaotic and imprecise sublime aesthetic. These images appear without narrative context, stripping the men of any motives. Instead, they appear reactionary, attempting to master and control the impossible figure in front of them. When the sublime object confronts them and eludes their strict boundaries of rational understanding, they struggle to subdue and contextualize the sublime excess. Their automatically violent response, their effort to destroy the object that escapes their sensory understanding, is a critique of masculinity.

However, the description of Wonder Woman on this first page insists that she does not only evoke the sublime, but also the beautiful. She is "a woman with the eternal

beauty of Aphrodite . . . yet whose lovely form hides the agility of Mercury and the steel sinews of Hercules." Beginning a list of her heroic qualities with her gender and physical appearance, this description maintains that Wonder Woman's beauty is one of her essential assets. While Kant believes that we feel the sublime when our powers of reason overcome our limited powers of imagination and we "f[ind] in our mind a superiority over nature itself in its immensity" (120), later, feminist theorists of the sublime question our ability to master and comprehend the sublime catalyst. Claiming that the sublime is a subject's "encounter with and response to an alterity that exceeds, limits, and defines her," Freeman designates the feminine sublime as an aesthetic that "does not attempt to master its objects of rapture" (2-3). The sublime "exceeds language." "[I]t simultaneously impels and disables symbolization, and its effect is that we can never relinquish the attempt to find words for some of the unspeakable things that remain unspoken" (116). Rather than force the imagination into submission, as Kant describes, Freeman's sublime object is a physical presence that rationality "cannot contain," that "calls into question the mere possibility of containment" (123). Joanna Zylinska agrees with Freeman, arguing that the feminine sublime deconstructs Kant and Burke's masculine sublime when it reminds us of the "incalculable and the untamed" qualities of femininity (29). If previous conceptions of the sublime were "constructed upon the suppression of excess and the negation of sexual difference," the feminine sublime "springs from the respectful recognition of the power of the sublime," a sublime that exists in excess and which the subject can never entirely fathom (32). Zylinska argues that the sublime only becomes a controlling force when theorists "maintai[n] a radical separation between beauty as associated with feminine gentility and sublimity which represents masculine strength"

(62).

Wonder Woman's beauty forges her power, demanding respect of its physical, gendered, form. The narration compares her to a powerful natural force; "Like a crash of thunder from the sky," she erratically appears and disappears, throwing herself into the midst of criminality and disrupting evil with her female body. By "hid[ing]" her superstrength and agility, beauty upsets the expectations of those who believe the female body is a source of weakness; since surprise is an essential component of the sublime, her beautiful body facilitates confusion, respect, and awe by veiling her immense physical prowess. It is an essential component of her sublime presentation in a patriarchal society. Beauty prevents those who encounter her from, to use Freeman's word, containing her. With her startling, beautiful body, she is more mysterious, obscure, and incomprehensible, and, thus, more powerful.

Though most men in Diana's new world react to her the same way, with surprise and reactionary violence, Steve Trevor seems to understand the power of the beautiful, if only partially. Flying in Wonder Woman's invisible plane in *Sensation Comics #1*, Steve briefly wakes up from his coma, sees Diana in her Wonder Woman costume, and exclaims, "I'm in Heaven! There's an angel smiling at me --- a beautiful angel!" He immediately faints again, and Diana replies, "He called me an angel --- a beautiful angel. That's the first time a man ever called me – beautiful!" Of course, Diana has never interacted with a man before, and so has never had one affirm her beauty. The exchange between mortal man and the superhuman woman represents the aesthetic effects of a feminine superhero on a masculine populace. Steve begins with a kind of sublime; he is confused and disoriented when he questions whether or not he is in Heaven and speaking

to an angel, but he immediately recognizes the female figure in front of him as beautiful. His classification of Wonder Woman as a "beautiful angel" is an example of how he names and begins to understand this new experience. Just as Kant claims the subject arrives at an understanding of the sublime, Steve generates his own realization by way of the beautiful, mistakenly believing this aesthetic to be more easily comprehensible.

Diana repeats the structure of his declaration, naming the noun, "angel," first, and then using an appositive to rename the angel as beautiful. She is struck, not by her designation as an angel, which she seems to accept in this scene, but by the description of her as beautiful. Wonder Woman has come from Paradise Island, a place populated by goddesses who accept their own powers as natural and beautiful, and in her first interactions with men, she is satisfied with their experience of her. As this issue progresses, she comes to understand that the male interaction with the beautiful in this new society is limited. Interacting with people on the street, she witnesses a beautiful aesthetic the way Kant and Burke imagined it working, devoid of power and separated from the sublime. The next time Steve Trevor calls her beautiful, she dismisses it as flattery, and by the end of the issue she rejects his version of the aesthetic. In a death-defying stunt, Wonder Woman hangs from a ladder swaying beneath her invisible plane and snatches Trevor as he falls from the sky. Again, he calls her a "beautiful angel," but this time she corrects him and says, "A guardian angel is more like it!" This is not to say that she disowns the beautiful – she continues to express pleasure at the designation – but rather that she wants both the beautiful and the sublime to exist concurrently; her female body inspires both aesthetics.

6.5 Sublime Objecthood

Kant claims that judgments are universal and disinterested, but everyone in this new world experiences Wonder Woman's body differently. After leaving Steve at the hospital, she goes "window shopping," appearing as what the narration calls an "unconcerned," "scantily clad girl."[13] In one panel, two older women pass her on the street and, whispering to each other behind cupped hands, call Diana a "hussy" and a "brazen thing." A man, staring over their shoulders at the red, white, and blue-clad figure, accuses the women of jealousy and exclaims, "Ha! Sour grapes sister. Don't you wish you looked like that!" By the next panel, Diana has attracted a crowd, with three men and one woman standing around her and trying to describe the female figure before them. "Boy! Whatta honey!" says one man. "Aw…I'll bet it's some sort o' publicity stunt for a new movin' pitcher," says a small boy. "If it is, they certainly go to extreme lengths to attract the public eye!" claims another older woman. And, "Well, they certainly attracted *my* eye!" says a younger man. Diana notices the circle of people around her with a sideways glance but does not interact with them. In the next panel "all thoughts of Diana are forgotten" as a trio of criminals dash out of a bank.

This scene exposes the double standards in American society that can accurately and simultaneously identify Wonder Woman as both a brazen hussy and a desired sexual object. The character appeals to both the desires of the other characters in her narrative world and also to readers who gaze at her representation on the page. It is her brazen sexuality and sexual appeal that led Wertham to write *Seduction of the Innocent*, and contemporary critics to dismiss the character as an example of a misogynist fantasy. Wonder Woman insists on the primacy of her body, displays it without shame, and

encourages others to experience her as an aesthetic object. Wertham and the critics who share his concerns assume that this kind of objectification is always and universally immoral and degrading. While it is true that the persistent sexual objectification of women in texts, and often most egregiously in comic books, severely limits female characters, *Wonder Woman* texts attempt to reclaim objectification as a sublime function, refocusing our attention on the physical, incomprehensible power of the object that can never be fully mastered. Rather than subvert our impulse to objectify, to lust after a physical object at the expense of that object's subjectivity, *Wonder Woman* attempts to use objecthood to reclaim sexuality and physicality as a necessary facet of subjecthood.

According to the denotation of the word, an "object" is "something material that may be perceived by the senses." It can both inspire feeling by "stir[ring] a particular emotion" and also serve as the recipient of feeling when it stands for "something mental or physical toward which thought, feeling or action is directed." An "object" can be both the end result of "an effort or activity" and also the "cause" that provokes activity ("Object"). So although an individual object might be easy to describe, as all definitions of the word emphasize the distinct and clear boundaries of the object, the word "object" is nebulous and vague. An object may be a noun or a verb. It may be physical or it may be immaterial, an entity or a rhetorical position. Because "object" resists the bounds of a singular definition, the act of "objectification" becomes equally unclear. To objectify is partially "to treat as an object" ("Objectify"), but treating a particular figure or phenomenon as an object might provoke endless varieties of subsequent attitudes and behaviors.[14] In designating Wonder Woman as a sublime object, an object that catalyzes the feeling of the sublime in its incomprehensible immensity and power, the text invites

us to objectify the character, as both a powerful woman and a sexual being – two attitudes which are not contradictory. By assuming all the definitions of the "object," Wonder Woman embodies form and action, expressed language and silent motivation, in other words, the sublime and the beautiful.

But to objectify is also to "cause to have objective reality" ("Objectify"). Objectivity, "based on facts rather than feelings or opinions: not influenced by feelings" is antithetical to aesthetics, and particularly to the sublime aesthetic that resists containment ("Objectivity"). The social connotation of objectification, then, becomes a negative and restricting way to view other subjects, a way of denying the other subjectivity. Objectification is a way to treat the other as a means rather than an end itself, an attitude that Kant's moral imperative condemns, and to turn the other into an objective (rather than the more mysterious and indefinable object). When Wonder Woman continually displays her sublime body to other characters, performing impossible tasks that language and reason cannot fully contain, she blatantly resists this latter kind of objectification.

A three-panel sequence depicts the transition of Diana from a merely beautiful object into a sublimely beautiful object. In the first image Wonder Woman stands among the crowd, listening as they all label and define her. They each have different ideas about why Diana appears before them in this unusual form, but they are all confident in their explanations of her body. The second panel suddenly transitions from this scene to a different perspective of a new group of characters. Three bank robbers shoot a security guard as they attempt to flee the crime. The thick black lines that define their faces make the men look panicked and ugly, their guns raised to a prominent position in the frame.

The third panel again depicts the scene from an entirely different angle, reintroducing Wonder Woman as she leaps through the air "as if out of nowhere." These last two panels are smaller than the others on the page, encouraging us to read these action-packed moments quickly. The break from Wonder Woman in the second panel makes her reappearance in the third panel disorienting, and the motion lines that indicate her trajectory lead from somewhere out of frame. The bank robbers perceive that she has "dart[ed]" from "nowhere," and so does the reader. There is no visual consistency between the first panel and the third, upsetting our notions of how time progresses through space in the sequence. The narration confirms that the events could be concurrent or sequential, using words such as "suddenly" and "out of nowhere." While in the first panel the other characters very clearly express their judgments, language starts to break apart in the third panel. "What th-?" one bank robber stutters, "It's a dame!" But even this last description of Wonder Woman as a woman becomes confused as the panels proceed. Wonder Woman stops the bank robbers' bullets with her bracelets, clamps her hands around their wrists, and throws them around as though they weighed nothing. "Wh-?" a robber cries as she spins him around her head. "Wha- What's goin' on around here?" a policeman stammers as he witnesses the scene. Earlier, the crowd uses terms such as "hussy" and "honey" to limit the figure they describe, attempting to diminish her potential as a subject by claiming her as an object. But this short action sequence shows how Wonder Woman's body, a gendered, beautiful object, does not fall into clear categories of definition. When the crowd again tries to rationalize the impossible actions they just witnessed, they settle on vague terminology, claiming, "Now that was something!" as she sprints from the scene. Though they "wonder who she is?" they will

never fully understand the answers. They know she is a beautiful woman, but by upsetting all the expectations of a patriarchal society, Wonder Woman's body confuses, astonishes, and upsets.

Every issue of *Wonder Woman* juxtaposes these moments of a body under observation with moments of a body in motion. Wonder Woman might pause on a busy street and allow people time to form judgments about her appearance, but she soon bursts into action, saving these same people from dangerous criminals and forcing them to reevaluate their judgments. So, narratively, there are starts and stops in the heroic sequences, demonstrating how a body can both perform and pose. These two contradictory functions of the material body collapse in the comics form, which implies motion through a series of still panels. Comics theorist Hillary Chute claims that "images in graphic narratives can have the effect of unsettling epistemological binaries" because the "uneasy structure of words and images" "provoke[s] us to think about how women, as both looking and looked-at subjects, are situated in particular times, spaces, and histories" (92-3, 2). Each panel in a *Wonder Woman* comic freezes the hero's actions and the reader can consider her form as both a narrative and sexual object, but Wonder Woman is usually in motion. In *Sensation Comics #1*, following her apprehension of the bank robbers, she races alongside a car, running eighty miles per hour, motion lines emanating from her outstretched body. In this frame she is poised with both feet inches off the ground, red boots pointing as though performing a graceful *grand jeté*, and blue-starred culottes tastefully covering just enough thigh. So even while her body performs impossible, stunning feats, the panel also freezes her in a beautiful pose. To understand the narrative sequence, the reader must consider Wonder Woman as both a beautiful

object on the page, and also as an object in motion. According to Hannah Miodrag, individual panels are "interdependent yet discrete narrative units" (209). So readers must, as Barbara Postema suggests, "weav[e] back and forth." The reader "'skips over' the gutter to look at the next panel, and then mentally goes into the gutter to fill in the actions, events, or transitions that took place in the gap between the panels," creating "an intricate and continuous negotiation and (re)consideration of various panels at the same time" (66). The reader may consider the body as an object, gazing freely at the visual display, but in order to follow the narrative, she must fill in the gaps of Wonder Woman's impossible actions. So the process of reading Wonder Woman is much like the process of the sublime; we observe her beautiful still form and also how that beautiful form renders the hero infinitely powerful.

Of course, male superheroes are also frozen in time, their muscles straining through their formfitting suits as they fight crime in front of bystanders on busy city streets, but Wonder Woman's body designates her as distinctly gendered, unique in this genre of male heroes. Since Marston believed that femininity constitutes heroism, her sublime female body serves atypical heroic ethics. The bodies of male superheroes confirm the socially accepted values of masculinity: they use violence and rational manipulation to maintain their power over others. Wonder Woman displays her female body because it is a model for femininity's potential. According to Marston:

> A male hero, at best, lacks the qualities of maternal love and tenderness which are as essential to a normal child as the breath of life. Suppose your child's ideal becomes a super*man* who uses his extraordinary power to help the weak. The most important ingredient in the human happiness recipe still is missing – *love*. It's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous. But it's sissified, according to exclusively masculine rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. 'Aw, that's girl's stuff!' snorts our young comics reader. 'Who wants to be a *girl*?' And that's the point; not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype

> lacks force, strength, power. Not wanting to be girls they don't want to be tender, submissive, peaceloving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weak ones. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman. (Lepore 187)

Though Marston appears to be advocating for a kind of gender fluidity here, he still maintains essential gender differences. Girls are girls because they are born with "maternal love and tenderness." The problem with popular texts, as Marston sees it, is that girls no longer "want to be girls" when they read stories about female characters that "lac[k] force, strength, power." In other words, women should be "good and beautiful" women – they should embrace the "strong qualities" that are essential to their gender – and men should also be more like women by incorporating certain feminine qualities into their idea of masculinity. Most men, and certainly all male superheroes, reject femininity as weak. Wonder Woman derives strength from a female body that is subject to harsh social restrictions, and evokes the sublime by breaking through those restrictions. She does so by displaying her material body in both active and inactive states, beautifully frozen in single panels, and sublimely escaping the bounds of the one still image.

Wonder Woman is confident and comfortable in this doubled position as both beautiful and sublime object. The men she fights obviously struggle to match her abilities, faces contort in strenuous effort, and bodies fall to the ground in jumbled piles. Wonder Woman remains calm throughout every violent encounter, her face smooth and often smiling as she quips about the ease of battle. In this issue, she claims that the fighting is "fun," and the bank robbers accuse her of "playin' with 'em" when she effortlessly tosses them around. When they are all lying broken and disarmed on the ground, she stands with one boot on top of the stack of bodies, hand draped across her

thigh in a statuesque pose. Expressing disbelief and confusion, the police want to question her, but, again, after a panel depicting the hero standing still, the next panel shows her sprinting away, only her head visible in the bottom right corner of the frame. Catching the attention of a theater promoter, she soon joins a vaudeville show, content to display her abilities for the entertainment of others while she waits for Steve to wake from his coma. Almost every early issue contains at least one panel in which Wonder Woman dons her costume, usually in a sitting position with one leg outstretched as she pulls on her tall, red, high-heeled boots. The image is reminiscent of a pin-up pose, and seems to turn Wonder Woman into a kinky fetish.[15] However, poses and performances like this are also constitutive of her heroism. In this issue, as "the girl transforms herself . . . to the exciting Amazon maiden Wonder Woman," she exclaims, "It feels grand to be myself again!"

Many contemporary readers have interpreted these depictions of Wonder Woman's posed body as evidence of her capitulation to a patriarchal system. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," film theorist Laura Mulvey claims that images subject women, as objects, to a phallocentric, "controlling and curious gaze" (839). The woman on screen (or, here, on the page) signifies the castrated "male other," and so visual representation constructs "voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms" to "circumvent her threat" (847). Theorists like Tania Modleski have argued for the autonomy of female spectators who might interpret images of women's bodies differently, and Mary Ann Doane claims that "because the body has always been *the* site of woman's oppression . . . perhaps it must be the site of the battle to be waged" (384). Wonder Woman does pose as an object of pleasure, but, contrary to Mulvey's thesis, her objecthood never

"circumvent[s] her threat," but rather ensures her body as sublimely threatening. Wonder Woman is beautiful, and critics are right when they suggest that her beauty is intentionally erotic, but, as a sublime object, Wonder Woman evades the control of what Linda Williams calls a "masculine economy of production."

> . . . [W]hen sexual pleasure begins to cultivate (already inherent) qualities of perversion . . . when [the] subject sees its object more as exchange value in an endless play of substitution than as use value for possession – then we are in the realm of what must now be described as a more feminine economy of consumption. (Williams 273)

Wonder Woman's endless provocation of the sublime for those who surround her, her constant evasion of understanding and explanation, and her insistence on her body as an object is a kind of sublime perversion, forever involved in an exchange of erotics that no one can ever possess or control.

Wonder Woman's body is distinctly physical and visible from the moment she is conceived. In the character's first appearance in her own publication, *Wonder Woman #1* (published June 1942), Marston reworks the origin story. This comic spends more narrative time and page space than the *All-Star Comics* version does on Paradise Island, injecting the first origin with more detail about the Amazons' history and Princess Diana's birth. When comics were establishing their economic viability in the 1930s and 1940s, writers and artists frequently tried to renew interest in their superhero characters with new origin stories. Changing significant details of the characters' pasts, these reboots often crafted more detailed origins to help account for the heroes' mysterious, impossible superpowers, but since Marston retained creative control of Wonder Woman through the 1940s, this new origin expands on Diana's past while maintaining the character's magical combination of Greek and Roman mythology. The first pages of this

issue include brief accounts of the four gods that Wonder Woman emulates: Aphrodite, Athena, Hercules, and Mercury. Images of the four gods appear in the four corners of the page, while a slightly larger image of Wonder Woman lies in the center. Mythology helps to legitimize the superhero genre's existence, as though comic books are an extension of the more revered stories of antiquity.[16] The references to Greek and Roman gods also lend Wonder Woman's focus on the body a mythical lineage. As beings with superpowerful bodies, these gods procreate, eat, drink, and dance; they participate in all of the bodily pleasures of the material world. Wonder Woman, with her Amazonian powers and access to eternal life belongs to this corporeal world of the Greek and Roman gods.

All-Star Comics first introduced Diana at home, surrounded by friends and family. The new origin in *Wonder Woman #1* begins with Diana in an American hospital with the convalescent Steve Trevor. When she exits the hospital, she accidentally leaves a parchment behind. An archeologist at the Smithsonian translates the parchment and discovers the Amazonian origin story, or "the greatest find of modern times!" Though the parchment reveals information about Diana and the Amazons, that information is still mythical – full of magical objects and impossible feats. Rather than explain Diana's powers, then, this new origin firmly situates her in a nonscientific, fantastic realm; even with this more detailed account, Diana still resists rational containment. *All-Star Comics* discloses Hippolyte's Amazon history in prose. *Wonder Woman #1* represents the story visually and begins much earlier, enfolding the Amazon origin into a broader narrative about the conflict between mythological gods. Disgusted by the enslavement of women under the rule of Ares, God of War, Aphrodite "shaped with her own hands a race of

super women, stronger than men." The image depicts Aphrodite with her hands covered in clay, molding the figure of the Amazon in front of her. "I will breathe life into these women, and also the power of love! They shall be called 'Amazons.'" Each Amazon's individual identity appears instantaneously; Aphrodite merely breathes, and she endows the clay with life. In one panel the clay is green and still, and in the next she is Hippolyte, a fully formed, adult woman. This version of Amazon mythology emphasizes their objecthood by focusing on the physical qualities of the clay and its superhuman shape. One panel depicts Aphrodite crafting a life from clay, reproducing asexually and magically injecting each body with interiority, and the next shows Aphrodite placing a magic girdle around Hippolyte's waist. While the *All-Star* origin only referred to Hippolyte's possession of the magic girdle, this new origin visually represents the transfer of power, clearly divorcing procreation from female sexuality. By creating life asexually, the goddess is then free to advocate a sexuality without ends, purposeless and infinitely pliable. The girdle does not oppress female sexuality, but emphasizes the presence and sublime potential of sexuality and the female body. By constituting the power of her physical body, and constantly reminding Hippolyte of her relationship to the divine, the magic girdle enables female domination of violent, "stupid men."

6.6 Sublime Maternity

By the time *Wonder Woman* hit newsstands in 1941, feminist efforts to detach female sexuality from procreation had long been underway. Margaret Sanger had successfully lobbied for and defended women's right to birth control access and established the Birth Control Federation of America. She was also aunt to Olive Byrne, a

woman who lived and had children with Marston. Jill Lepore chronicles Marston and his partners' investment in the women's rights movement through the 1920s and 1930s, stating that they were particularly interested in Sanger's book *Woman and the New Race* (Lepore 120). In it, Sanger makes her argument for birth control education, claiming that women should make informed decisions about their reproductive rights. "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother" (Sanger 94). In some ways, Sanger's argument seems like an example of Kantian thinking; the body becomes a physical restriction that traps the mind to the sensible world, and reason frees the mind to experience the supersensible. Woman "had chained herself to her place in society and the family through the maternal functions of her nature, and only chains thus strong could have bound her to her lot as a brood animal for the masculine civilizations of the world" (2). The lack of birth control creates a "grievous . . . material condition," but "her spiritual deprivations are still greater" (52). When the government deprives women of knowledge, it deprives them of spirituality, or what Sanger also calls "basic freedom" (5).

However, Sanger also takes a proeugenic stance that emphasizes the way physicality determines women. Sometimes her arguments appear to support women's agency: "If we are to develop in America a new race with a racial soul, we must keep the birth rate within the scope of our ability to understand as well as educate" (44). Overpopulation has "brought about social disaster" and women must 'consciously and intelligently *undo* that disaster and create a new and better order" (6; original emphasis). Then her arguments for eugenics contradict her arguments about choice, and birth control

becomes a means to create a new, superior "race."

> No more children should be born when the parents, though healthy themselves, find that their children are physically or mentally defective. No matter how much they desire children, no man and woman have a right to bring into the world those who are to suffer from mental or physical affliction. It condemns the child to a life of misery and places upon the community the burden of caring for it, probably for its defective descendants for many generations. (89)

A subscriber to Larmarkian evolution, Sanger, like many intellectuals of her generation, believed parents would pass undesirable traits such as "insanity" or "drunkenness" to their children (87). In this passage she reiterates her belief in the primacy and inescapability of physicality, a force that can overpower any rational control we may exert. Female procreation, as the site where the rational possibilities of birth control and the inescapable powers of the physical body meet, becomes a sublime force: "Motherhood is the channel through which these cultures flow. Motherhood, when free to choose the father, free to choose the time and the number of children who shall result from the union, automatically works in wondrous ways" (45). Rather than submit to a patriarchal world, to "think as men think, to try to solve the general problems of life as men solve them," women, "attaining their freedom" can "create a human world by the infusion of the feminine element into all of its activities" (98-9). "She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her; she must reverence that within her which struggles for expression" (99). It is not rational control of the sensible that produces and contains the sublime, then, but the physicality of motherhood that can evoke "aw[e]" and "reveren[ce]." Women cannot escape their biology, and while they may exert some rational control over when and how their bodies function, they can never completely contain the female body through rationality. The solution, argues Sanger, is to revere the female body, and to accept the essential qualities of femininity as superior to those of

masculinity.[17]

Though she published *Woman and the New Race* in 1920, Sanger's position was controversial through the 1940s, as the numbers of arrests, imprisonments, and censorships surrounding this issue corroborate. While a majority of American citizens began to approve at least some kinds of birth control, many religious organizations condemned the practice, including the Catholic Church, which facilitated a number of raids on birth control clinics through the late 1930s (Himes 90; 94). Christianity's insistence on the spiritual nature of motherhood fueled the controversy. As Sanger claims in her book, Christianity taught that "all sex expression is unclean" and meant for the sole purpose of "bring[ing] 'God's image and likeness' into the world" (109). Even the organization Sanger herself started, the Birth Control Federation of America, changed its name in 1942 to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, buckling under conservative pressure to hide the biological purpose of the group. Sanger argues that Christianity requires women to simultaneously satisfy their husbands' sexual desires, producing children according to the dictates of biology, and also view sexuality and bodies as "repugnant, disgusting, low and lustful" (108-9). To oppose the legal restriction of female sexuality, imprisoned birth control advocates such as Margaret Sanger and her sister, Ethel Byrne, conducted hunger strikes, forcing their guards to recognize biological imperatives and prioritize the physical demands of the body rather than contradictory spiritual ideals.[18]

Marston presents his own ideas about procreation and femininity in Wonder Woman's birth story, revealing his investment in women's reproductive rights. Ruling the super race of Amazons on her own island, Hippolyte "learns the secret art of

moulding a human form." Overseen by "Athena, goddess of wisdom," the procreative process beings with a rational decision to craft a beautiful form. Athena watches as the queen sculpts a bright swirl of white material into a statue of a human child. The statue is small, smooth, and delicate, comprising of gradual variation and a "clean and fair" color (Burke 102-6). In other words, the statue induces a "pleasing" "sense of loveliness" that, according to Burke's description, qualifies the construction as aesthetically beautiful (90). "Hippolyte adores the tiny statue she has made as Pygmalion worshiped Galatea." So, in the next frame Aphrodite replaces Athena and, "Granting the Queen her prayer, bestows upon it the divine gift of life!" The third panel in the sequence shows a naked toddler jumping into the arms of its mother, Hippolyte, the goddesses no longer in the frame. This sequence depicts the physical aspect of procreation, the actual construction of the body of the child, as a rational and beautiful process, while the sudden animation of that child with life and interiority is supernatural, the combination of love and will. Each individual panel merges the beautiful and sublime when it completely excludes (violent) men from the process of reproduction, and instead represents creation as a cooperation between (divine) women. The baby Diana is a beautiful object, a statue meant for aesthetic enjoyment, but she is also, through her magical birth, an impossible, sublime object, an example of physical stimuli escaping all bounds of explanation.

By moving the locus of procreation from inside the womb to outside the female body, Marston demystifies complicated biology and designates the process as beautiful, but he simultaneously stresses the obscure, incomprehensible qualities of creating life, identifying reproduction as sublime.[19] In the transition between the first two panels in the sequence, Hippolyte's creation is visible; readers can see the statue begin to take shape,

but the transition between the second and third panels is more abrupt, forcing readers to construct their own account of the moment the statue transforms into a living baby. The narration attempts to bridge the gap, explaining that Aphrodite "bestows . . . the divine gift of life," but the details of this bestowal are vague. Language cannot fully explain this birth. Barbara Postema argues that the gaps in comics create meaning through "fragmentation and absence" by "invit[ing] readers to fill in the blanks, making the reading of comics an active, productive process" (xiv). By juxtaposing the inanimate against the animate so abruptly, this sequence represents the jarring, confusing aspects of the sublime, and since no one can fully account for Diana's sudden transformation, she evades the controlling rational explanations that might limit the parameters of her power.

Barbara Freeman and Joanna Zylinska argue that the Kantian version of the sublime is a kind of rape of the imagination by reason. Noting that theorists often associate the imagination with the feminine, Freeman claims that Kant's description of the sublime is also a description of the masculine overpowering a feminine other (3). In order to maintain the illusion of the subject as autonomous, reason becomes a "rapist" that despises "weakening, dispersal and effeminacy" (Zylinska 23). By uniting beautiful and sublime aesthetics in a representation of procreation, Marston shows how the aesthetic can be free from the oppressive powers of a penetrating reason. In Kant's terms, the imagination cannot comprehend this birth, but neither can reason. Instead, the moment points to the reader's limits and inadequacies, and the existence of a world that is "unbounded" and, thus, sometimes inaccessible. Through the combination of the sublime and the beautiful, the sublime becomes a force of creation, the forging of a new, powerful physicality. Rather than a painful undoing of a complete and whole subjectivity, this

sublime shows the way that an unbounded natural force (gendered female) can free the subject from the confines of rationality (gendered male).

The daughter emerges from the clay fully formed, a strong, healthy child. "How marvelous," exclaims Hippolyte, "She is my little wonder child!" With the words "marvelous" and "wonder" Hippolyte expresses awe and reverence for her own reproductive powers; she also "adores" this child. Diana retains the magical quality of her birth throughout Marston's *Wonder Woman* comics, a body that merges the powers of the beautiful and the sublime. Her observable form evokes a sublime aesthetic that never transcends physical reality and, therefore, inspires feelings of wonder followed by adoration, rather than fear followed by superiority. As far as readers know, Hippolyte never creates another life, content with her one "wonder child," and no one – Queen, Diana, or reader – knows the capabilities of the goddesses who facilitate the creation. This refusal to explain, the rejection of reason in favor of magic, is a quality of the feminine sublime, which, according to Freeman, "tak[es] up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness" (11).

By positioning her as a sublime catalyst, Marston does not deny Diana subjectivity, but he does highlight her objecthood. Early comics most often represent interiority through thought bubbles, and compared to other comics from the period, *Wonder Woman* contains relatively few insights into Diana's thoughts. Even when the comics represent her interiority, she is usually thinking about actions not emotions as she fills in plot points in the narrative. In this issue and elsewhere she worries about her observable body, hoping that she disguises herself sufficiently to remain mysterious. While her objecthood does not preclude her subjecthood, the lack of insights into Diana's

interiority creates distance between the reader and the hero. Her relationship to the supernatural world of the gods bequeaths her with subjectivity, but her interiority is obscure and inaccessible. We read about her adventures with the same awe and wonder as the ancillary characters who always surround her. She is a physical form, a piece of clay who transformed into a person, and Marston represents her as an object who is also an "incalculable othe[r]," slipping out of the bounds of objectification but never denying the primacy of her physicality. The result is that Wonder Woman can be both subject and object, can act and inspire others to act, does not need to adhere to a hierarchical relationship between the physical and rational, and can find power in presence rather than Kantian freedom.

6.7 Breaking Free

Diana uses her position as an "incalculable other" in America to fight for safety and equality, but her freedom is often in such stark contrast to other American women that she seems jarringly alien. Just as her sublimity prohibits readers from identifying with her, it also inhibits her relationships with Steve Trevor and other humans. In *Sensation Comics #1* she stands outside the hospital where Steve lies and says to herself, "Steve…Steve…I've got to see him – be near him – but how?" Of course, she is superpowerful and could walk into any setting she chooses no matter how strict the visiting hours, but her desire for closeness here reflects her desire for an intimate relationship with Steve. As Wonder Woman, Diana remains inaccessible, so, seeking to escape sublimity at least part of the time, Diana arranges to switch identities with an army nurse who, conveniently, sits outside the hospital, looks identical to Wonder Woman, and

is also named Diana. This new Diana, Diana Prince, abruptly leaves to join her fiancé in South America, giving Wonder Woman a new identity, a nursing license, and a job at the army hospital. As Diana Prince, Diana the Amazon princess can experience America through the restrictive, controlling atmosphere of patriarchal domesticity.

Though Diana relinquishes her own power to magically procreate when she leaves Paradise Island, she does experience the social demands of childbirth and motherhood in America through a surrogate. Long after Wonder Woman has exchanged her job at the hospital for a secretary position in Steve Trevor's office, the original Diana Prince returns to America with Dan, her inventor husband. In *Sensation Comics #9* (published September 1942), we see what has become of Diana Prince, a mother confined in a tiny apartment according to her husband's will. "Please let me go to work, Dan!" she begs her husband, perched on his lap, but he replies, "No! My wife doesn't have to work." The next panel shows her on her knees by her husband's side, pleading, "But Dan, we're down to our last dollar and the baby must have food." Still, he refuses. Finished with begging, Diana puts on a nurse's uniform and moves to the door, telling her husband that he "can't stop" her, though he looms threateningly over her shoulder with a terrible scowl. Wonder Woman, identifying this woman's subservience to her husband as immoral, trades places with Diana Prince again and goes to Diana and Dan's "shabby house" in their "cheap neighborhood" in order to "investigate." Though Dan may be "poor and probably honest," he is a violent, angry man who mistakes Wonder Woman for his wife and threatens her. Desperate to keep Diana in the home and out of the workforce, he chains her leg to the stove. An undaunted Wonder Woman exclaims, "How thrilling! I see you're chaining me to the cookstove. What a perfect caveman idea!" Playing along,

Wonder Woman spouts sarcastic remarks, asking Dan, "How long must I remain chained, *darling*?" and "Tell me about your invention, *dear!*" Writing the pet names in bold lettering, the comic makes clear that Wonder Woman is still performing, actively enjoying her imprisonment and Dan White's overblown masculine display.[20]

Many critics have written about depictions of bondage in *Wonder Woman* comics. On nearly every page of these early issues, Wonder Woman appears bound or tied, and when men bind her bracelets together she loses all her superstrength. Turning to Marston's academic writing and psychological research, these critics have made convincing claims that Wonder Woman's bondage is both a feminist statement, appropriating suffragist discourse on the chains of sexism, and a sexual kink, providing pleasure to both readers and Marston himself.[21] Most critics read issues like *Sensation Comics #9* as supporting the argument that Wonder Woman represents a kind of pleasurable, righteous submission based on love rather than immoral domination.[22] In this example of bondage, though, Wonder Woman's pleasure does not lie in her state of submission. Instead, she seems to derive pleasure from performance, pretending to be a submissive housewife while knowing that she can reverse that performance at any time. She is delighted that Dan is the "perfect caveman," and her pose, leaning back in a chair with her legs fully outstretched, suggests that she finds nothing threatening about this masculine demonstration. Rather than fight Dan with physical violence, a battle so uneven that it could not possibly be interesting, Wonder Woman plays with the violent husband, mocking him for her own enjoyment. She placates his ego by submitting to the stereotypical housewife role, and Dan soon reveals valuable information about his current invention, prompting Wonder Woman to intervene and save the country. Dan White is

anything but a “dear” or a “darling,” but by using those terms, Diana finds a way to resist abusive, uneven, and patronizing ideas about contemporary marriage tropes from inside the union.[23]

These tropes are deeply entrenched in the patriarchal world that Diana now occupies. By the end of the issue everyone seems satisfied, the original Diana Prince perches on her husband’s lap, delighted that he is a successful inventor, while Wonder Woman cuddles the baby in the background. In the next panel Wonder Woman has transformed into the Diana Prince persona again and tells the original Diana, “I’m glad to get my position back, but I envy you yours, as wife and mother.” Outside of her Wonder Woman costume, still performing as a stereotypical American woman, Diana exposes this thinking as illogical and harmful. As Wonder Woman she can jump in and out of whatever social role she desires, she can hoist a struggling man onto her shoulder or hold a baby and no one can stop her. As when she plays the role of the submissive housewife, her Diana Prince character critiques contradictory thinking patterns inherent in strict gender roles. Through Diana Prince, a woman who is bound socially rather than physically, she experiences American culture and uncovers the inequalities and injustices that she combats.

Dan’s chains prove no challenge for Wonder Woman; it takes her ten seconds to break the lock – a number that seems disappointingly long to her – and she discovers that the real Diana Prince has been kidnapped. Wonder Woman finds Diana chained to a hospital bed, under threat of a nefarious doctor. The doctor attempts to subdue Wonder Woman, too, filling the room with “anaesthetic gas” and forcing her to hold her breath. Performing gender stereotypes to manipulate her would-be captors again, Wonder

Woman pretends to be unconscious, allowing the villains to bind her with wire and place her in a "bronze roasting box." Over four separate panels they meticulously detail their evil plan. They perceive Wonder Woman to be merely a physical body that they can manipulate and control. But again, Wonder Woman easily breaks free from the bindings, bursting forth from the box and leaping onto her captors in one, larger panel in the bottom right corner of the page. She yells, "Excuse my carelessness, boys, but you shouldn't stand in a lady's way!" as she flies through the air, arms outstretched. She hits the men with a "konk!" and a "blam!" Her face is free from lines, calm and amused, whereas the men that she hits are comically ugly, with brutishly large hands and teeth. Peter draws men here as almost animalistic, incapable of understanding the spectacular woman flying towards them. The first panel on the next page depicts Wonder Woman holding the unconscious villains up by their collars. By initially complying with their expectations, her physical actions undo their rational capabilities. Somewhere, in the gap between pages, she has dominated these two men; her physical powers remain undefined as she affirms that a sublime object in excess disrupts our rationalization of gendered bodies. Wonder Woman might be an object that they can tie up and contain for a moment, but only because she allows them to do so. The scenes of binding are meant to be, as critics claim, symbolically significant and sexually titillating, but they are also plot devices that allow Wonder Woman to display her powers, her ability to break free, no matter what the circumstances. Even when she allows men to weld her bracelets together, as she does in *Sensation Comics #4* (published April 1942 with a cover that depicts her breaking chains in close-up), and loses her supernatural powers, she always and easily breaks the chains that bind her.

According to John Fiske, popular culture is co-created: a combination of the efforts of producers to meet the demands of consumers.[24] As "a site of struggle" between the "forces of dominance" and "the popular tactics by which these forces are coped with, are evaded or are resisted," popular culture is comprised and maintained by both complacent and subversive readings (18): "All popular culture is a process of struggle, of struggle over the meanings of social experience, of one's personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order" (23). Because popular texts are the site of a sliding and evasive interaction between dominant cultures and subversive counter-cultures, they are particularly prone to seriality and intertextuality. No one text is a "completed object" and texts tend to dissolve into "leaky boundaries," blending together and into "every day life" (101). *Wonder Woman* is one of these "leaky" texts; she transgresses concrete boundaries, spreading into popular vernacular through repeated exposure.[25] In newspaper strips and comic books, through references to the character in commercial and political culture, Wonder Woman may win every battle she fights, but over and over again she must reemerge and face the same challenges. *Wonder Woman* never ends.

As a "leaky" text, *Wonder Woman* can constantly bind its heroine without ruining her reputation as an athletic, capable, feminist character. In fact, it is the repetition that constantly reinforces her power. An image of Wonder Woman bound appears alongside an image of Wonder Woman in action, flying through the air and conquering her captors. These images, in juxtaposition to each other on the page and in conjunction with other issues and versions of the character, exist concurrently. The reader is free to glance at the page, linger over certain images or move her eye quickly to another image, moving

backwards and forwards as she pleases. Though critics carefully articulate the difference between the two, in some ways a single panel is analogous to a single sentence in a novel; we may separate the sentence and subject it to careful analysis, but we can only understand meaning when we consider the sentence as a small portion of a whole text. As Thierry Groensteen claims, ". . . moment-to-moment reading does not take a lesser account of the totality of the panoptic field that constitutes the page (or the double page), since the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by peripheral vision" (19). The human eye cannot examine a single panel of a *Wonder Woman* comic without at least noticing the entire composition of the page, full of panels, gutters, and margins. Because the gaps in comics "continually ask to be filled" by an involved reader (Postema 121), Wonder Woman comics are not just, as Douglas Wolk claims, "an excuse for stories about sexual domination and submission" (98). Rather, the comic reading experience, as Jared Gardner argues, is "necessarily intertextual and inevitably incomplete, requiring the reader to insert his feelings and interpretations actively into the text itself" (81). This freedom of reading creates "queer readers" because comic reading encourages reading practices that are "unruly or subversive" (92).[26] Readers have the ability to defy the sequentiality of comics, extending, truncating, skipping, and repeating, any single panels they want. This kind of reading may lead to objectification, freezing panels of an inactive, bound, Wonder Woman, but it also insists that Wonder Woman is constantly in action, bound only to break free over and over again. Repetition works in many ways in serialized comic books: in the repetitive binding and unbinding in a single issue, in the seriality of popular culture across multiple issues and publications, and in the process of reading and rereading. Wonder Woman is always bound, but she always breaks free.

The bound and unbound Wonder Woman becomes a boundary: the boundary between stasis and action, objectification and subjectification. Constantly moving between these binary positions, she never fully encompasses one. As Homi Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*, "The boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing* in a movement" that is "ambulant" and "ambivalent" (7; original emphasis). Her border position provides Wonder Woman a range of behavioral possibilities, and she enjoys both the pleasures of binding and breaking free. The border is a particularly accessible position for those subjects who exist on the borders of society. As a point that is literally neither here nor there, the boundary accommodates "a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities" (Bhabha 6). Wonder Woman, the superpowerful female, is the sublime object on the border between the sensible and the failure of the sensible. Her ability to confuse, to obscure and to mystify, situate her as the sublime object that rationality can never contain, accentuating the borders between subjectivity and the natural world. The border marks an end, but also a beginning, suggesting that subjectivity might be inaccessible and fragmentary, but it is also full of infinite possibilities. Unlike *Batman*, *Superman*, or *Captain America* comics, *Wonder Woman* texts never make any effort to account for her superpowers scientifically or rationally. She is magical. She is divine. She is beautiful and, therefore, she is sublime.

6.8 Liminality of the Female Sublime

Beginning with *Wonder Woman #2* (published September 1942), Marston starts testing Wonder Woman's power by pitting her against other supernatural forces, male

gods who fight to control her spectacular body. Characterizing contemporary politics as a contest between gods, reminiscent of *The Illiad*, these issues place Wonder Woman on the border between mortal and immortal, god and human.[27] She protects the people of Earth from the supernatural world of the gods. In earlier battles, humans could not control her, but they could always observe her. As she begins to interact with a heavenly realm that earthly minds cannot access, she often evades sensory perception. The first page of "The Duke of Deception" in *Wonder Woman #2* illustrates Wonder Woman's position on the border between mortal and immortal worlds. Inexplicably, one Wonder Woman figure stands on the shore of a beach looking at a second Wonder Woman figure wading into the ocean and throwing a boulder at the "Duke of Deception." Before the comic logically accounts for the two Wonder Woman figures, the character exists in two places at once – on land and in the sea, watching as another version of herself battles an immortal god. The shoreline literalizes the division between the two by providing a clear line between the doubled figures, but the motion lines around the edges of the waves show the line is also in perpetual motion – undefined, in constant flux, and always in a state of unclear obscurity. The force of her boulder hits The Duke of Deception with a prism of red and white light, motion lines run around and over his body, representing his terror and confusion. Magically existing in two places at once, Wonder Woman is a physical presence that defies rational explanation, and her heroic potency depends on the constant unresolved tension between the sensible and the supernatural. Though she interacts with the metaphysical world of the gods, she is effective because her violence is physical, a result of her impossible position in the sensible world.

Because Wonder Woman's body constantly houses new subjectivities throughout

this issue, it is nearly impossible to track who occupies it in each panel. In the supernatural world of the gods, the Duke of Deception believes that he can easily capture Wonder Woman because "She's a fool! She's a fool for honesty!" He creates a series of "false forms, or phantasms of living people, which he animates with his astral body" in order to manipulate the hero and her fellow Americans. Taking a Wonder Woman form from the wall – where it hangs next to Mussolini, Hitler, and Hirohito phantasms – Deception holds the dangling body outstretched in front of him and then "slip[s] into" it, "animating the false form" and "practic[ing] her postures before a mirror." Once again two Wonder Woman figures exist in the same panel, one an animated phantasm and one a reflection of the phantasm in the mirror, suggesting that the physical body of Wonder Woman is endlessly duplicated, existing at many times in many places. So while Batman retains his power through reputation – terrifying the criminals of Gotham through rumors and propaganda – Wonder Woman is powerful because her body is infinite. When he calls her a "fool for honesty," Deception understands that Wonder Woman's power derives from the physical world and the real consequences of her material violence. Believing that he can rationally manipulate material reality with his metaphysical powers, he only exacerbates the problem. Wonder Woman's power emanates from her form, and the ability of her form to proliferate, repeat, and break out of the confines of reason. Deception plans to animate the Wonder Woman form with various subjectivities, but since Wonder Woman's body constitutes her heroism, it always fights in her behalf.

Many panels in this issue represent Wonder Woman's form in multiples, either empty of subjectivity or occupied by various "astral bod[ies]." Wonder Woman asks her best friend, Etta Candy, to pose as the superhero by occupying the false form and

distracting the villain. While the "real" Wonder Woman stands on the wings of airplanes, lassoing invading Japanese soldiers, enemy soldiers capture the "false" Wonder Woman and tie her to a stake. Though the narration occasionally tries to clarify which subjectivity occupies which form, the images on the last page quickly dissolve into chaos as the two identical figures trade places, burst into action, and finally meet in the last panel. Standing face to face against a entirely blank background, the two Wonder Woman forms discuss the future of their enemy but make no plans as to what to do with this second Wonder Woman, this "false form." The issue ends with the doubling intact, the two forms seemingly content to carry on conversations in duplicate, blending and mixing their two subjectivities into one body that proliferates across the page. This doubling, the indisputable effectiveness of Wonder Woman's body no matter who occupies it, is one way that the comic maintains the power and primacy of the physical.

Wonder Woman is resourceful, rational and clever, but it is her objecthood, her musculature, her marksmanship with a lasso and a boulder, her swimming skills, her jab and her uppercut that enable her heroism. Other characters consistently perceive that her useful, capable body is a beautiful body, and it is this beautiful body that overwhelms everyone who experiences it. Rather than a Kantian experience with a sense of finality, her heroism evokes an aesthetic loop: her power constitutes her beauty, which constitutes her sublimity, which constitutes her power.

Foreshadowing the plot twist to come in this same issue, Wonder Woman proclaims that her body is limited because she has "only one pair of hands." Later, after a Hawaiian spy named Naha kidnaps the hero and binds her with her own magic lasso, Wonder Woman no longer has even one pair of hands, but all of the constrictions on her

body facilitate a spectacular display of her powers. Naha leaves Wonder Woman in the cabin of a ship, bound and gagged with tape holding down her eyes. While Wonder Woman easily "contracts her powerful facial muscles and opens her mouth, tearing the adhesive tape from her lips," she decides to leave the tape across her eyes, claiming "My feminine vanity won't let me pull out my eyelashes! I'll have to escape blindfolded!" Still bound and blind, Wonder Woman effortlessly out-swims Naha – "a champion swimmer in Hawaii" no less – finally kicking Naha into Etta Candy's waiting boat. This sequence highlights both the physical and social constraints that women might experience in what the Amazons call "man's world." Not wanting to damage her beauty, Wonder Woman refuses to extricate her eyelashes, but because she remains bound, she is able to more obviously dominate her opponent, showcasing her abilities through her beautiful, female body. Her femininity, which she describes here in the troublesome context of vanity, easily becomes her greatest asset by catalyzing her most superheroic, unbelievable and impossible actions. Her body can be bound and unbound, existing here and there, confuse and contradict while simultaneously inspiring and motivating.

By refusing to sublimate the female body under a patriarchal culture's rational ideals, the Marston series of *Wonder Woman* comics turn the constricting social constructions of femininity into a physical, sublime force, yet although Gloria Steinem is right to be "amazed by the strength of [*Wonder Woman's*] feminist message" (2), Marston's stereotypical and offensive representations of race contradict his feminist goals. The comics present Naha, a Hawaiian, as sexual object without sublime mystery. Her body is racialized and, thus, fully knowable. Wonder Woman punishes her by spanking her, treating her like an insolent child and exposing Naha's motivations as

simplistic and deterministic. The spanking helps Wonder Woman easily persuade Naha to work for the hero, turning the Hawaiian into a plot device and then dispensing with her entirely. With two Wonder Woman forms who can both act heroically, there is no room for the Hawaiian woman who only follows orders. Marston might turn objecthood into a sublime position, identifying the physical object as a potentially mystifying, and, therefore, powerful aesthetic catalyst. But he insists on the whiteness of this object, asserting that her sublime body descends from asexual reproduction of a pure Amazon race. Because of this disturbingly eugenicist slant, the feminism of Wonder Woman as a text is extremely limited. As a white woman who often oppresses women of color, Wonder Woman cannot fully claim that physical bodies can be the source of powerful, sublime actions, but only that certain types of physical bodies can inspire the sublime. The fact that this body is gendered female is an exciting, unique perspective in the superhero genre, but one that does nothing to challenge the dominate racial hegemony of the time, and, instead, suggests that physical characteristics are not always sources of power, but rather socially determined and therefore very real sources of political restraint.

6.9 Conclusion

Still, as an on-going and never-ending serial text, *Wonder Woman* comics can continue to provoke queer and subversive readings. If, as Fiske claims, readers co-create popular culture though the "struggle over the meanings of social experience," then the serial character can exist in multiple iterations that identify the fragmented, incomplete nature of misogynistic and racist ideologies (23). By positioning Wonder Woman as a sublime object, and specifically as a feminine sublime object, Marston and Peter injected

the superhero genre with feminist potential. Though their essentializing view of gender and their racist depictions of persons of color often undercut their arguments about the power of femininity, the serial nature of popular culture generates texts that contradict themselves, providing room for endless meanings and readings. Wonder Woman is, in different texts and often concurrently, a feminist spokesperson, a cultural icon, a sexualized fetish, a victim and perpetrator of misogyny, a capitalistic tool, and a political weapon. Even when single instances of Wonder Woman restrain her according to dominant ideologies, her proliferation across texts through history is evidence of her sublimity, an excessive sublimity that never transcends the sensible world and can never be fully rationalized. No matter which role a specific narrative or image tries to bind her in, she will always break free.

Though the gendered bodies of superheroes produce different brands of heroism, the formal qualities of their serialized texts represent all of them in sublime excess. While all superhero texts are interested in bodies and in the extreme violence bodies can enact, Superman, Batman, the Lone Ranger, and Captain America all try to contain their impossible bodies through careful rationalizations. Wonder Woman's insists her beautiful, superpowered body is effective as a performance of unrestrained, sublime force, and not only because she directs it with moral maxims. Through visual repetition across the page and narrative repetition across texts, all superhero bodies are infinitely fragmented, and, as a result, neither the creators, the readers, nor the superheroes themselves can ever fully or morally contain their heroic violence in a cohesive rational system. Wonder Woman, working with rather than against these realities of serial

publication and distribution, demonstrates the power of her nonlogical body by evoking the sublimely beautiful. When the body is in excess, its possibilities are endless.

6.10 Notes

[1] Indeed, Wonder Woman's gender is still underrepresented in the comic book world, with publications that feature female superheroes – like the female version of Thor, Dr. Jane Foster, or Marvel's first all-female superhero team, A-Force – still making headlines and sparking controversy in fan communities.

[2] Wertham also made arguments against more general representations of women in the comics, claiming, "exaggeratedly high heels are introduced and appeal to these latent fetichistic [*sic*] tendencies. . . . . Several boys have told me that they collect these comics illustrations and use them for sexual fantasies, with or without masturbation" (182). He interviewed "a small boy who had made ample use of the reading and entertainment we provide so plentifully for children" and who claimed that when "he grew up" he wanted "to be a sex maniac!" (174).

[3] See Joseph Darowski's, Peter Lee's, and Jason LaTouche's essays in *The Ages of Wonder Woman* for examples of this kind of criticism.

[4] Stanley also claims that Wonder Woman's body echoes contemporary feminine standards of beauty: "Female sexuality was dangerous but exaggerated, controlled, shaped, and yet enhanced by the bras and girdles of the period. Impossibly *zaftig* bodies, almost grotesquely large breasts and wide hips, a la Monroe or Mansfield, epitomized the reactionary excesses of the new ideal" (151).

[5] While there are arguably more books and articles about Wonder Woman than about any other superhero, I have not found a study that does not center the argument on gender. This is not to say that discussions about Wonder Woman's impact and function in a gendered world are unnecessary (after all, this essay, too, is about gender). I only mean to highlight the disparity between the narrow focus of Wonder Woman criticism and the more diverse studies of a character like Superman.

[6] In her study of graphic autobiographies, Hillary Chute argues that, "graphic narrative asserts the value of presence, however complex and contingent" (2). "The field of graphic narrative brings certain key constellations to the table: hybridity and autobiography, theorizing trauma in connection to the visual, textuality that takes the body seriously" (3-4).

[7] Quotation from *Sensation Comics* #1 (published January 1942).

[8] For example, Ann Radcliffe frequently describes women experiencing the sublime in her late 18th-century gothic novels, though philosophers like Nietzsche, Emerson, Freud, Bataille, and Lacan maintained through the 20th century that the sublime was a particularly masculine experience.

[9] Feminist utopian novels were especially popular leading up to Wonder Woman's publication. Jill Lepore describes Marston being enamored with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* (87). The book tells the tale of a trio of male scientists that discover a secluded, all-female society that uses eugenics and parthenogenesis to create a

community of "genius" women with "the evenest tempers, the most perfect patience and good nature," and "the absence of irritability (28; 46).

[10] This lack of internal conflict, the absence of representations of introspection in *Wonder Woman* comics, might produce the effect that Joseph Darowski describes in his introduction to *The Ages of Wonder Woman*: "Wonder Woman is recognizable but unfamiliar, an ambiguous icon, a symbol without definite meaning" (1). What I am calling a sublime object.

[11] Kant's insistence that aesthetic judgments can and must be made without interest excludes a feeling like love from judgments of taste. Love, an emotional or physical attachment to an other, assumes that the subject has a personal investment in the object of their love, and understands the purpose of that object. A feeling of love thus becomes a "rational judgment, and so it is no longer a free and pure judgment of taste" (77). According to Kant, aesthetic experience is entirely subjective, independent and free of the physical object that inspires the experience, and love, because of its dependence on the physical other, can never be free. Philosophers who write about aesthetics do not agree on this point. Burke distinctly attaches aesthetics to the objects that inspire judgments, claiming that it is the objects themselves that contain essential qualities. While Kant claims that the subject only needs to infer universality of experience, Burke believes the objects themselves ensure universal aesthetic responses. Therefore, it is conceivable for Burke that an object that catalyzes a sense of the beautiful might also cause the subject to feel love.

[12]When a phenomenon or object that might otherwise produce the sublime fails to conclude with the subject's mastery of the object, it will cause a feeling of "submission, prostration, and a feeling of our utter impotence" (Kant 122).

[13] Critics often cite this episode specifically for evidence of how *Wonder Woman* comics promote essentialist views of women that "ultimately reinforce the idea that women must adhere to the standards identified by the dominant culture as appropriately feminine" (Finn 15). "Careful to show that women's strength and assertiveness did not unsex them, Wonder Woman adhered to the dominant standards of acceptable femininity" (16). While I certainly agree that Wonder Woman's desire to go shopping immediately after arriving in her new country is an example of essentialist thinking about women and femininity, I believe that Marston's goal was to champion these qualities of the feminine regardless of gender, suggesting that both men and women might benefit from a greater commitment to the beautiful aesthetic (represented here through fashion). I agree with Noah Berlatksy when he argues, "For Marston, gender is absolute and essential, but it is not necessarily tied (as it were) to specific male and female bodies. Women must learn to be women, and men must learn to be women" (116).

[14] According to Joanna Zylinska, infinite possibility for action is a characteristic of the feminine sublime. Accepting Lyotard's description of the sublime as an anticipation of the object, she claims, "The ethics of the feminine sublime cannot be described as a sum of possibilities, as there always remains an event which has not happened yet but is only

on the verge of taking place" (152).

[15] Indeed, artist H.G. Peter was notably influenced by Alberto Vargas and his Vargas Girls drawings (Lepore 197).

[16] Kelli E. Stanley makes the same claim, arguing that American comic books borrowed from common genres and tropes because "Naturally, Americans were hungry for homegrown heroes who could link contemporary American ideals to the prestige and potency associated with the past" (144). In the late 1930s and early 1940s Americans seemed to be particularly interested in Greek and Roman mythology. In 1942 Edith Hamilton published her bestseller, and soon-to-be-classic, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*.

[17] Some contemporary reviewers criticized her sole focus on motherhood, claiming that her "selfish interest" in the "emancipation of women rather than the welfare of the family or of the child" does not acknowledge "men, also, have been degraded, kept ignorant" (Eliot and Eliot 636).

[18] Her critics argued that, "Whether or not Mrs. Sanger wants their co-operation, the support of men and of the churches is very essential to the new morality of parenthood" (Eliot and Eliot 535), but more birth control clinics opened every year during the 1930s, and by 1940 there were 567 functioning clinics in the country (Himes 90).

[19] In *The Wandering Womb*, Lana Thompson writes about the historical discourse surrounding women's reproductive bodies. Noting that the Enlightenment "proclaimed the value of reason" but did not grant those rational abilities to women, she describes the way that doctors and theorists in this period medicalized the body as a way of explaining mysterious processes like reproduction (110, 146). "And if women could be studied with the same techniques that revealed the secrets of the universe, the place of the female sex in the natural world would become evident. But this new rationality only served to bolster the set of definitions that upheld women's physical and mental inferiority and to reinforce the social stereotypes regarding them" (103).

[20] Hannah Miodrag writes about the "spatiality of text in comics," arguing that comics use language in a uniquely material way, "controlling its rhythms visually, and carefully timing the unfolding of narrative elements and syntactic turns." The "impact of language's graphic side" in comics helps distinguish the specific speech act from the "conceptual signifiers that constitute *langue*" (78-9).

[21] Kelli Stanley notes that Wonder Woman's bracelets, enabling her submission, are also a sign of her femininity (163), and Mitra Emad claims bondage is how the comics "assert the masculine realm over the feminine" (980). Michelle Finn agrees that the bondage is a symbol of femininity, but claims it is a "theme to promote female liberation" (13). Noah Berlatsky also interprets the bondage as a metaphor for early feminist goals, arguing, "There is no way to imagine liberating yourself from bondage without imagining bondage, with all its connotations" (27).

[22] For an example of this argument, see the second chapter of Berlatsky's *Wonder Woman: Bondage and Feminism in the Marston/Peter Comics, 1941-1948* entitled "Castration in Paradise" (74-127).

[23] Later, she calls Dan a "package of trouble" and Steve Trevor calls him a "screwball."

[24] Even with Marston's overwhelming influence, Wonder Woman was still at the mercy of popular audiences. After her first appearance in *All Star Comics* #8, Max Gaines conducted an informal survey of his readers, asking which hero should be the newest member of the Justice League. Jill Lepore describes how the process was partially rigged, with Wonder Woman's face appearing on the survey more than any of the other potential heroes, but in the choice between Mr. Terrific, Little Boy Blue, the Wildcat, the Gay Ghost, or the Black Pirate, consumers wanted to see more of Wonder Woman (204).

[25] David Nye stresses that the 20th-century American sublime "grows in significance with repetition" because "Only a prolonged reexperiencing of the site can overcome the egotistical demands of the informed visitor" (15).

[26] Of course, as a series of individual drawings or, as Scott McCloud defines the form, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer," comics have a strongly suggested reading order (9), but most comics theorists agree that the reading experience is not entirely linear.

[27] For more on Wonder Woman's relationship to mythology see Lillian Robinson's *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* in which she claims the hero is a combination of the Christian Virgin Mary and the Greek Amazon warrior.

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